

the OPPORTUNIST

by SAMUEL YOUD

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the OPPORTUNIST

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For

J. F. BURKE

ATTENDED BY

the OPPORTUNIST

1

Miriam was wearing a blouse he had not seen before; white silk, trimmed with lace at the neck. She set down the morning's post on his desk, and looked at him.

He said, "A new blouse, Miriam? It's very nice."

"Oh, Mr. Bates, it's an old one! I've retrimmed it, that's all."

The flush that he had deliberately provoked transformed her normal paleness; he watched the change with pleasure. It was one of the things that gave a good start to the morning.

"You must have a flair." He was glancing through the letters. "You needn't stay now. I'll dictate later."

When she had left his room, he pressed the button marked Driscoll on the office telephone. He heard the formal voice: "Driscoll speaking."

"Peter? Frank. Spare me a few minutes for a chinwag?"

"Come right along."

He pushed open the door of Driscoll's office and Driscoll looked up, taking off his spectacles. He said, "All right, Lucy. Break for knitting."

Lucy left, giggling; she was small and had dyed-blonde hair and wore a sweater with improbable but eye-taking contours. She had taken dictation for Bates on an occasion when Miriam

had been forced, by influenza, to have a few days off, and her inefficiency had been startling. He gestured after her.

"You haven't sent her back to the pool yet?"

"There isn't any fish in that particular pond as good."

"The Garaghty girl can type."

"The Garaghty girl is a Plymouth Brother or Sister or whatever it is, and looks it at that. I thought you would have realized that I only find life supportable in this place by having something to clutch at from time to time. Lucy is very clutchable, and evades as badly as she types."

"Perhaps the two things go together."

"It's a sad thought, but experience is on your side. Don't think I'm entirely blind to the firm's best interests. I should like to have a secretary who could type, read back her own shorthand, and spell the majority of three- and four-letter words. I suppose you don't feel brotherly enough to pass your Miriam over?"

"She wouldn't meet your other needs."

"I wouldn't say that. A little on the anemic side, perhaps, but that might have its attractions after Lucy. And her legs are quite definitely worth the effort."

"I didn't mean that. I meant that she falls within the law—good typing, good evading. Though it would more probably be reprisal than evasion."

Driscoll smiled. "Which course did she adopt with you?"

"She hasn't had to adopt either. I'm guessing, though I think accurately. She's a serious girl."

"And you're a serious man. No fleshly weaknesses."

"I'm happily married."

"You're a lucky man. When the blood cools from its present tempestuous pace, I shall have to settle down myself. Raise a family, maybe. I shan't make as lucky a match as you did, though—I couldn't very well, could I?"

"No, I'm sure you couldn't."

"Well? You didn't come round just to flaunt your marital bliss in my lecherous face?"

Bates helped himself to a cigarette from the box on Driscoll's desk. Driscoll produced a lighter for them, and took a cigarette himself.

Bates said, "I came round on an errand of mercy, Peter—simply to do you a good turn."

"I take good turns very willingly. No pride in the Driscolls. What's in the package? Not Miriam, I gather."

"I see you're down for Holly Ash on Saturday—representing the board at the Gala Day celebrations. I thought you might find it pleasanter to take Lucy for a run."

"Pleasanter by far. Unhappily Lucy's current fiancé comes back on leave this week—from the Corps of Military Police, of all things. I was toying with the possibility that Holly Ash might present one or two suitable candidates for the typing pool here. I wouldn't say I was looking forward to the Gala Day in itself, but I had envisaged compensations."

Bates said, "I could hardly offer to procure for you. Do you really think the compensations outweigh the disadvantages?"

"I won't, if it's going to stand in the way of your generosity. I take it you are offering to do the honors on my behalf? This is very good of you, Frankie. Very, very good. A happily married man offering to give up a domestic week end simply to save a brother director from a little boredom—greater love hath no man."

Bates said, "I was born at Holly Ash, remember."

"I hadn't forgotten that. When was the last occasion that you went back there?"

"I haven't been since the war." He saw Driscoll's raised eyebrows. "My parents went back to Derbyshire after Helen and I were married. As for other people . . . you haven't had the experience of moving up in the world, have you?"

Driscoll smiled. "The reverse, if anything. I was born into the upper middle class, but the class itself seems to have been depressed somehow."

"Well, in my case . . . one's old friends . . . you have a feeling that you've changed a lot while they've remained just exactly the same. It's probably untrue."

"True enough, I should guess, in essentials."

"True or not, there's the impression and it makes it difficult to try to keep up with them. There are other difficulties too, of course. They're inclined to think you are patronizing them."

"And you are."

“And you are—of course. It all adds up to an impossible situation. That’s why I’ve stayed away from Holly Ash.”

“And what change has taken place to make you suddenly eager to see old sights, both natural and human? No, let me guess. How long have you been on the board?”

There was a moment’s silence. Bates stubbed out his cigarette in one of the silver-plated ashtrays that had been sent to each of the directors, the previous Christmas, by the firm’s chief German rivals. It was Driscoll who spoke again.

“Well, never mind. You can go, with my blessing.”

Bates said slowly, “You hit the nail on the head, Peter. I want to go back to Holly Ash as the visiting director. I want to do everything—preside at the foremen’s tea, present the prizes for the sports, dance at the Gala Night Ball. I want them to have a good look at me.”

“Will you take Helen down?”

“No.” He said that quickly. “Helen would be as fed up with the whole thing as you would. As I would, if I had had your background. This is going to be a personal, private pleasure.”

“I wonder.” Driscoll looked at him. “You’re running a risk of a letdown. You know what some of them will be saying behind your back—even if you don’t take Helen down.”

“That’s why I’m not taking her down. On my own it won’t bother me—don’t worry about that.”

“You’re the best judge. You want me to pass the word along to Parker?”

“I thought you could simply mention to him that something had turned up which made the trip inconvenient for you, and that I’d offered to do it instead. You don’t need to be specific.”

Driscoll scratched his neck. “No, I don’t. When did you say it was you were last back there?”

“I’m not quite sure. ’Forty-three or ’forty-four.”

“You’ll find some changes. All the postwar extensions—the new rolling mill, the annealing plant, the die-making factory. And the housing estates that have come with them. Most of it will be strange.”

Bates looked round the room. The London headquarters of Amalgamated Cables was a new building, representing one of the first nongovernment postwar licenses and only completed

the previous year. The private offices of the directors shared a uniform quiet luxury that registered simple contempt for the firm's own business. The floor was of polished wood blocks, with one large and two small Chinese carpets. The windows were curtained with Brussels lace. The desk was fumed oak, topped with calf. There was no sign here of the hundreds of tons of base metals that passed daily through the factories at Sinterden and Holly Ash, Llyntany and the Great West Road. Here at the center which ruled the vast periphery of production belts and automata, craftsmanship held a last redoubt. Driscoll had put his own stamp on this particular room by hanging a couple of paintings on the oak-paneled walls: minor Impressionists.

Bates said, "There's a point after which change ceases to have much effect. When I was a child, Holly Ash wasn't even a village. Just a straggle of houses, and one shop. Farming country, and a good deal of it dairy farming. I used to walk three miles to school at Huyton—stone and clay lanes, and fields and copses on either side."

"Less than ten miles from Liverpool," Driscoll observed.

"You couldn't see Liverpool. Sometimes, on clear mornings, you could see the mountains of North Wales, but never Liverpool. It's a funny thing, Peter. I've got a grandfather still living at Castleton—my mother's father—who can walk out into fields and lanes that haven't changed since his grandfather's time. I think of that sometimes when I hear people talking about social justice. He was never able to save a penny in his life, and yet he can walk out into those fields."

"You think that's important?"

"When I think of Holly Ash, one of the first things I think of is the Prentice farm. I can see the lane, the farmhouse, the pond, the stables, so much more clearly than I can think of the factory. And yet I saw old Prentice standing by those very stables with a shotgun, watching the A.C. car bumping toward him over the potholes. I heard him curse them and afterward, when they had gone and he thought he was alone, I heard him crying."

"What happened to the farm?"

Bates smiled. "The Fine Wire shop is where the stables were.

The Scrap takes the place of the farmhouse. There was a wonderful pear tree that covered almost the whole of the south wall. I've never known pears like them."

"I suppose not. When I was a boy I had an uncle who had some kind of business at Hong Kong. He brought a lot of presents when he visited us in England, and he always brought a great big jar of Chinese preserved fruits. I used to think they were some special brand, and I hunted for them for years. Now I don't eat preserved fruits." He glanced at Bates. "Take my advice, Frank. Don't go back."

"I've told you, it was dead for me long before I left. I'm not going back to try to recapture my lost youth."

"I should hope not," Driscoll said. "I've always thought you were a happy man, Frank. Aren't you a happy man?"

"Very happy."

One

Thursday was baking day; on Thursday morning his mother made all the cakes and scones and pies for the week ahead. It was part of her custom that on that morning too, she made coffee, in a big white jug decorated with a blue windmill and a blue Dutch boy and girl. One of the great delights of school holidays was the prospect of Thursday mornings at home, and the smell of coffee mixing with that of pastry and cakes cooking in the big black-leaded oven beside the fire grate. He lay on the horsehair sofa, watching the parrot's cage swing in a slow circle above his head, as the parrot clawed her way sideways round the bars.

His mother was a big woman who moved swiftly and with ease. She rolled the pastry out with quick flowing movements, tossed it across the dish, and cut and crimped the edges almost at once.

"Last of the bottled berries." she said. "No more gooseberry pies after this till the new lot comes in."

"Can I have some more coffee, Mam?"

"It'll be trickling out of your eyeballs. All right, help your-

self. There's enough in the jug. But leave some for Mr. Heddon."

The address was Ash Cottages, Holly Ash, a cluster of half a dozen cottages, in two rows of three, that huddled in the angle between the main road and the ten-foot wall enclosing Pinnick House. The cottages had originally been built for servants at the House, and three of them were still used for this. But the number of servants had dropped—the stables had been empty since the early months of the war—and strangers had been allowed in with the tacit consent of the bailiff.

Frank's father had come in on being demobilized from the Navy. He had sailed with the son of the head gardener at the House, and it was through his influence that he had been given the chance of the cottage. He and his wife were both from Derbyshire, but in that part of Derbyshire at any rate the prospects of jobs were poor. Liverpool was altogether more promising, and the main road that ran through Holly Ash carried also the tramway route linking Liverpool and Prescot. The cottage was snug and in good condition, with a walled yard and a great stretch of garden. A bathroom had been put in just before the war by that Joshua Pinnick whose surviving son, of four, was now trying to keep the House going on a much reduced income. The weekly rent for the cottage was three shillings and nine-pence.

It was fortunate that shelter cost them so little, because his father had not found it easy either to get or keep jobs in Liverpool. When he had been out of work, Frank's mother had been given cleaning at the House. Although he had had a job now for a couple of years, she still went cleaning there. Now that Frank was going to the grammar school, money was still more urgently needed.

The path from the main road passed the fronts of the first three cottages, and the backs of the last three. Theirs was the end cottage. As he poured himself more coffee from the jug, Frank could hear the happy whistling that marked Mr. Heddon's approach. The parrot heard him too; she swung, chattering excitedly, from her perch.

"That's him," Mrs. Bates said.

He opened the gate into the yard with a loud clatter, and

propelled his big yellow basket awkwardly through the open back door of the cottage. He was a little cheerful potbellied man, and he wore a neat white overall which even driving his decrepit van failed to dirty. He sat down on his usual chair just inside the door with a gusty sigh of relief.

“Getting past it, Mother!”

“I reckon we all are.”

“Go on, you’re still a chicken. Well then, Frank—holidays again? Don’t you have aught but holidays now you’re at the grammar?”

“It’s for Easter,” Frank said. “We’ve got three weeks.”

“Three weeks? Eh, then! I don’t know as we even got Good Friday when I were a lad. What the hell does that bird want?”

Esther was galloping round her cage, squawking with excitement or reproach. She climbed, gripping the wire with her beak, and flapped her wings in her emotion.

“Shame on you, teasing a poor bird,” Mrs. Bates said.

Mr. Heddon went across and peered up at the parrot. She got her neck through the bars and lunged down at him with her beak gaping.

“Nay, then,” he said. “She doesn’t know her manners. Does tha? Does tha, Esther? Say how do. Come on, lass.”

“How do!” the parrot’s cracked voice screeched. “How do! How do! How do!”

“That’s nicely!” From his pocket Mr. Heddon produced his weekly offering, a sweet finger biscuit, and held it up to the bars. Esther took it in her beak, and transferred it to one black wrinkled foot. She bit into it with great enjoyment.

“Like a Christian,” Mr. Heddon commented. “You know, if I were a parson I don’t know as I’d find it so easy, reckoning which I ought to pray for. I believe that parrot’s as near enough certain damned as most folks I know. Eh, she’s a wicked old trollop!”

Esther paused in her eating to bend her neck through the wires once more and fix him with her beady brilliant eyes. She squawked, “Ta! Ta! Ta very much!”

“Now, Sam Heddon,” Mrs. Bates said, “doesn’t that shame you, after saying that kind of thing about an innocent bird? Go on, you can pour your own coffee. It’s on the hob. What have

you brought me this morning? If it's that fat bacon again, you can take it back. My lot won't eat it, and I can't say as I blame them."

"Eh, Mother, you know you never get aught but the best from me. It may have been a bit on the fatty side, that bacon, but it were best quality fat. And I make no charge for my company."

"Well, let's have a look at it. You're taking it back, mind, if it's no better than last week's."

"It'll wait," Mr. Heddon said easily. "You get on with your pies." He took a drink of coffee. "That's good! That's very good indeed. I hear you've got some new neighbors down the road?"

"Neighbors? You mean, the new doctor? I just heard they moved in yesterday, that's all. Mrs. Pye said the stuff came in a London van."

"I thought I'd call in and have a look myself. I used to deliver there when old Dr. Thorogood was alive, until that wife of his got big ideas about having stuff sent up from Liverpool. They are from London. Big family of them. Only thing I wonder is, who's going to tend to the doctor?"

"Is he not so well?"

"He walks with a stick, and he doesn't look no more than half alive. He's been a big-made man, but the only thing you can say that means now is that he'll want a long coffin."

"It's not a very large practice. Perhaps he's come here because of that. Big family, you say? I heard there were two or three kids."

"Four. Eldest a boy and youngest a girl and a pair of mixed twins in the middle. A fine-looking set of kids. They'll be playmates for you, Frank."

"Frank's got his own mates already. He won't want any company from doctors' children, the kind of way they live."

"That's where you're wrong, Mother. He'll want different mates now that he's going to the grammar. You see how it is—here he is this morning, on holiday, and the village school hasn't broken up yet. Frank will need to make mates that are doing the same kind of thing that he does. You can't cage fighting cocks with ordinary hen-treading roosters."

"With doctors' children I reckon they'll be going away to one of those boarding schools, any road."

"Happen so. But four's a gradely number, and all at school age at the same time. And it's not a big practice, as you've said. I suppose he might have some money of his own, but from the look of him I can't think it could be much or he'd have retired. No, my notion is they won't have overmuch to make a tintin-nabulation with."

"There's more to things than money," said Mrs. Bates.

"It may be. But I've lived a long time without coming across anything else to give lasting satisfaction. I've always thought the great poet might have been speaking direct to me, as it were, when he wrote:

Take my word for it, Sammy,
The poor in a lump is bad.

I've not found things any different. It takes a great poet to talk great sense. Do they teach you about the great poets at the grammar, Frank?"

"We do poetry in English, Mr. Heddon," Frank said.

"And do you do Lord Tennyson?"

"We've done 'The Lady of Shalott.' "

"He was a man, if there was one. You'll not go far wrong if you stick to what Lord Tennyson tells you. There's another bit of advice in the same poem—happen you're a bit young for it, but there's some things you can't learn too early. I wish I had." He stretched his white arms out, declaiming:

And I knowed a Quaker fellow
As often has told me this—
Don't thee marry for money,
But go where money is!

And that's one thing, you might say, that I hold in favor of the Quakers; they understand the value of money. You want to make sure that you understand it too, lad."

"If it's a matter of learning how to cheat folks . . ." Mrs. Bates said.

"Nay, he doesn't have to learn those tricks. You don't find the Quakers getting up to them. They're not rogues, but they're

careful. Like the time old Harry Prentice took his cow to be serviced by Scurfield's bull at Huyton. He took a cow along to Scurfield's paddock one afternoon, and he brought a cow back the next. But he never said nought about a little trip he made at one o'clock in the morning, and he never let on to Scurfield that he had two cows as like as two crows. I knowed about it because I saw him leading the cow in the moonlight. Well, who worried? Harry Prentice was happy, Scurfield was happy, cows were happy, and I don't suppose bull was complaining."

"And how did it happen you were out by Long Lane at one o'clock in the morning?" Mrs. Bates asked.

"Did I say it were in Long Lane? I suppose I happened to be there by accident. It's a fair while ago now. I can't remember everything I got up to when I was a younger man."

"I should hope not, neither." She pushed the last of the pies onto the floor of the oven, where it was hottest, shut the door with an iron clang, and turned round to deal with Mr. Heddon. "Well, let's have a look at the stuff. I haven't got all day, though I know you have."

"Nay, I've not! Time's money, but so's friendship. Here we are, then. I've brought a bottle of sauce; I thought you'd be wanting one."

Mrs. Bates picked her requirements expertly from the big basket. "That reminds me. I'll want another cask of vinegar next week. You can take the empty one back with you now. Are these the best you could manage in the way of biscuits?"

"Now, Mother, that's a new brand, and the best on the market. You know I never bring aught but the best."

"I know you never do aught but talk nonsense. How much do I owe you for all that?"

"You owe me millions, but I'll settle for seven and ninepence halfpenny. Well, I shall have to be getting along. Mrs. Britton likes me to find time for a little chat with her if I can manage it."

"Especially now she's buried her husband, I should think," said Mrs. Bates.

"Nay, that just shows you how tongues will wag when they're long enough. Respectable old bodies like Emma Britton and

me. Hey up, lad! D'you feel like giving me a lift to the road with the cask? Fare you well, Mother. Come on, Frank."

When he had got the empty vinegar cask safely stowed away inside the van, Mr. Heddon drew out one of the big cake trays. He said to Frank, "Have a cake, lad. Help yourself."

Frank took a cream horn; it represented an extreme from his mother's excellent but plain cooking. The mock cream bulged out over the shell-like casing. He licked quickly so that there should be no loss.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Heddon." He grinned. "That's a halfpenny you've lost!"

Mr. Heddon laughed. "I can see how you got to the grammar! But don't thee be too sure I've lost a halfpenny. I'll have it back off thee yet, or I wasn't called Sam Heddon. You wait till you're a schoolmaster and I'm on the pension. I'll have a pint out of you; two maybe."

"Good-by, Mr. Heddon," Frank said.

"Tata, lad." He leaned out of the side of the van, grinning widely.

"Money, oh Money, thy praises I sing,
Thou art my Saviour, my Lord, and my King!"

The van disappeared up the road toward Prescott. Frank climbed onto the flat top of the wall, under the drooping elderberry branches, to finish eating the cake he had been given. It was a spot from which he and Ronnie Ashbridge had so often watched the streams of heavy traffic pouring into and out of Liverpool, the trams groaning uphill or clattering down, or, on the other side of the wall, the small strange world of life at the House.

He looked down into the grounds of Pinnick House. Here the stables had been, which were now the garages. A big square-looking car was standing out on the cobbles and being polished by one of the chauffeurs. Nothing very interesting was going on. He dropped to the ground and, waiting for a gap in the traffic, ran across to the other side of the road and climbed over the fence that divided off the tram lines.

The tram lines were laid on lawn grass; coltsfoot was in flower between the long strips of steel. At the other side, be-

yond another fence was undergrowth—grass and bushes and wild flowers—and the remains of a number of houses that had been demolished at some time; probably when the tram lines were laid. There was a wall about twenty-five yards from the tram lines, and beyond that a wood. This was a country of stone walls, and for the most part high ones.

Frank stayed for a few moments, his arms about one of the metal poles that supported the overhead electric wires, his ear pressed to the cold curve of its surface. He was listening for the approach of a tram. At last he heard it: the small throbbing roar inside the metal that was the herald of the juggernaut. He guessed—a downhill tram, and waited until he saw it swing round the sharp bend about a quarter of a mile away. Then he ran across and climbed the other fence. A bank rose quite steeply at this point. He sat on the trunk of an old tree, felled at least twenty years before and worn greasily smooth by much sitting, and watched the tram sail past him down the hill.

The day, which had been fine, was overcast; a mean gray sky that spared a few reluctant drops of rain every now and then. It was quite warm, except when a little wind shivered from the east.

He climbed the wall into the wood at the point where it had once been breached by some tree fall. Inside the wood it was dark and his feet made little noise over the carpet of leaf and leaf mold.

The lake was at the farther end of the wood. The wood itself was part of the Strelling estate, but only that part immediately by the lake was ever used by the family or their visitors, and since Mr. Strelling had died it had been allowed to deteriorate. The lake pavilion and the boathouse had simply been locked and left. This had not prevented the children from getting into them.

Frank climbed first through the broken frame of the window of the boathouse. There was only the one window; it was dark inside, and musty with the smell of rotting wood and stagnant water. A platform ran beside the well where the boats had once rested at their moorings; he could see the dim underwater shape of the boat they had sunk a couple of years before. It had been

half full of green water and lumber; they had pitched heavy stones into it until the gurgling water finally sucked it under.

There was a door leading into the pavilion, but they had never been able to break through it. He had to leave by the way he had come, and get into the pavilion through another window.

The pavilion was in two parts. There was no convenient entry to the other half; it remained a mystery. This half had three rooms, with a few chairs and tables, and a balcony that looked out over the lake itself. Frank went out onto it, and leaned on the rail, looking across the lake. It was about a quarter of a mile wide, and there was a small overgrown island in the middle. It had always been an object of desire to him. He had thought once of making a raft and trying to float out to it, but the others had given him no support. They might have risked the raft or the keepers, but not both.

He looked once more at the island, and prepared to make his way out through the window. It was then that he heard voices. The accents were unfamiliar and stilted. He caught his breath before he realized that they were only the voices of children.

One of them said, "This looks like an interesting hunting ground."

Frank climbed cautiously on one of the rickety chairs that were used for reaching the window from this side. He felt it creak beneath him.

A girl's voice said, "I suppose it's all locked up."

He raised his head so that he could peer through the window. There were four of them, two boys and two girls, and he guessed that they could only be the children of the new doctor. He would have expected to feel a number of emotions—resentment at their intrusion, curiosity, contempt perhaps for their odd southern voices—but in fact he was aware, at that sharp moment, only of wonder. They were beautiful. His eyes went from one to another. All their faces were clean cut and fresh, sharing a family likeness but distinct and individual, even the boy and girl who, most like each other, he guessed to be the twins. But it was their hair that was most striking: each blond, each different. The bigger boy's head was golden, and the smaller girl's so

fair as to be nearly white. The twins were a richer blond, deepening in the girl toward auburn, in the boy toward chestnut. Frank watched them. They stood casually, as though they owned this land.

The bigger boy said, "There should be some way of getting in."

He felt panic; panic made up of anger and fear and uncertainty. But he remembered to make his voice deep and as much like the keeper's as was possible. Frank shouted, "What do you young'uns want? Don't you know this is private? You can clear off as fast as you like."

He had dropped his head from the window frame. He had expected to hear the sound of them scattering, but instead there was quiet whispering from outside. He shouted again, "Go on! Clear off now! Or I'll have the bobbies for you."

They should be in precipitate flight, but the whispering could still be heard. Cautiously he raised his head again, and looked down at them. They were standing in a group together, the four heads clustered like flowers. The circle broke up as the elder boy walked forward toward the door of the pavilion; they must have thought his voice came from the ground level. The boy stood at his ease in front of the locked and bolted door. When he spoke, his voice was casual and without nervousness.

"All right," he said. "Come on outside and let's have a look at you."

Frank said nothing. He clung to the edge of the sill. The other children were watching their leader, but suddenly the twin girl lifted her head, and their eyes met and held. She raised an arm.

"There he is. Up there."

All their eyes found him now. They looked up at him; calm, interested, perfectly assured.

2

He noticed when he put his car away that Helen's was still out. He went into the house through the garden, and poured himself a whisky. Hoskins looked into the room.

"Ah, it is you, sir. Will you require tea?"

Bates pointed to the glass he had just put on the Japanese table.

"No, thanks. Did Mrs. Bates say when she would be back?"

"Not precisely, sir. I understand she is attending a local meeting of the party. I should not think she would be long."

"I remember now. And Sir Joshua?"

"I believe he is in the garden with Miss Monica. They had tea in the nursery, half an hour ago."

"Thank you. I'll find them. Yes, that's all."

He went out, and walked across the lawn toward the rose garden. From the close-cropped grass, at geometric intervals, small fountains sprayed their fine mist about them, fed by the invisible pipes beneath the surface. The small nozzles were flush with the grass. He found one half choked by a worm cast, and cleared it with a piece of twig.

He discovered the two of them, as he had thought he would, in the summerhouse beside the tennis courts. His father-in-law, as usual, was talking, and Monica was listening, her eyes remote, her neat black pigtails symmetrically side by side down her back. She looked up as he approached, and smiled faintly.

"Hello, Daddy."

He bent down to her, and she kissed him coolly on the cheek. He caught her pigtails with one hand; she still looked up at him, eyes slanted, lips thin and smiling.

"Had a good day, Monny?"

"Thank you, Daddy. You too?"

"No complaints. Well, sir?"

Sir Joshua said, "Sit down, Frank. Monica and I have been discussing her future. We can't make up our minds whether she is to marry a duke or a belted earl. What are your views on this pressing question?"

"A belted earl, I think. Provided he's well enough belted."

Monica said, "Grandpapa is being silly."

She had a devastating way of saying it; Sir Joshua laughed, slapping his knee and rocking himself forward. It was an odd thing, Bates thought, that he should derive such intense enjoyment from being insulted by a child of seven.

Bates sat down beside Monica. He talked to Sir Joshua over her head.

"I wonder if you would have a look at the United Carbide proposal later this evening? I've brought the stuff back with me, and I thought you might give me the benefit of your judgment."

Sir Joshua had taken a blade of grass, and he used it now to tickle his granddaughter's left ear. She bore this without sign for a time and then, in a swift movement, tore the blade out of his grasp. Sir Joshua relapsed into laughter.

"Will you have time to run over it with me?"

"Run over it? What proposal? No, Frank, you look after it. That's what you're drawing your director's fees for."

"It's merely a question of advice. And largely on a matter of principle. McIvar's blessed the scheme, and I can shoot it down. The point is: should I?"

Sir Joshua said to Monica, "But you are going to marry, aren't you, my dear? You wouldn't deprive me of great-grandchildren. Use your own judgment, Frank. If I hadn't known I could rely on it, you would never have got onto the board."

"You do know that I'm somewhat—isolated?"

"I could not be married for a long time," Monica said. "Probably you won't be alive then."

Sir Joshua laughed. "You're right, by God! There you are, Frank. Isolated? I never thought I should hear you complain on that score."

"I'm not complaining. I just wondered if you realized what the situation was. You haven't been in since your retirement, have you?"

His father-in-law looked at him; the eyes were as sharp, the

gaze as strong, as they had always been. "Would it have been better, do you think, if I had continued to interfere in things after officially giving it all up? You say you're isolated. You may be now, but if you're what I take you for, you won't be for long. You won't have long to wait before some of them start coming round. Driscoll, for instance."

"Driscoll has given me a hand from the beginning."

"Yes. He's that much sharper than the rest. I don't need to tell you not to trust him, I fancy. Anyway, I'm out of it. Whatever you do, you must do on your own. I believe if you give that a certain amount of close thought you will perceive that it's the best way." He reached for Monica's small hand and found it. "Since the evil hour of bedtime will so soon be on us, I suggest we display our nonchalance by going along to have a swing. Suggestion agreed? Is Daddy coming with us?"

"Not just now," Bates said. "I'll see you before bedtime, Monny."

He watched them go, decorously hand in hand, through the gate leading to Monica's play garden, and walked slowly back to the house.

He found Helen peeling off her gloves, and looked at her with an admiration the less marked for being genuine. She dropped hat and gloves carelessly on a table, and came to kiss him. Her particular achievement was to have combined the appearances of youthfulness and sophistication. She looked like a girl surprisingly adept in the arts of her elders. Monica, as a woman, would not be unlike her physically, and would almost certainly be as debonair, but she would look older at twenty than Helen now did at over thirty.

"Darling!" she said. "Sorry I'm late back. The Prole got into full flood and not one of us had the guts to stop him."

Bates nodded. The Prole was the working-class member of the local Conservative party association, garrulously and bitterly opposed to trade unions, the Factory Acts, and the poor standards of his fellow workers.

"It's up to you, but I hardly think the Prole is much of an asset to you. He's not the kind that's likely to win friends and influence people."

"Darling, I've been trying to tell Colonel Patchen that for

just ages. I think I'm beginning to make an impression. Though even if I did, I really don't see what anyone is likely to do about it. He scares us all madly. And as for influence . . . ! You know, it wouldn't be so bad his talking all the time about the slackness of the modern worker if he were a bit humanly slack himself. But apparently he does nothing but break output records or whatever they are. His firm would have sacked him long ago but for his being in the party. I gather everyone loathes him at the factory. It's hardly surprising."

"Poor devil. I'd like to say we could find him a billet with A.C., but as you know, I daren't. We pride ourselves on our excellent labor relations. He probably loathes everyone too—you people on the Executive a little less than his fellow workers, or perhaps a little more. Feel like a drink?"

"Mm, lovely. A gin-it. Yes, I feel sorry for him, but he really can be a damn nuisance. Twenty-seven minutes of T.U.C. iniquities—I took the trouble to time him today. Frankie sweet, are you going to go into politics ever? Or am I wasting my time? Not that I have a great deal to do apart from wasting it."

"You could have a shot yourself. You know most of the angles, you can talk, and there's a big pull in a pretty woman."

Helen took the drink he handed to her. "Thank you, precious. No go—too shrill. And too affected. It's you I'm keeping the seat warm for. But when are you going to be ready to slide into it?"

"God knows. Not for another ten years, anyway. Gran'paw left me a long furrow to hoe. I've just been trying to prod him into giving me some advice on a current problem, but he was only interested in taking Monny for a swing."

"At least he's useful that way. She has someone else to take an interest in her, apart from Miss Gibbs. Poor Monny."

"Poor Monny manages very well."

"I wish I were a better mother."

"Refer all complaints to me."

"I can't refer my own, can I?"

"And I can't have you making complaints about my wife. Helen, I shall have to be away this week end."

"Away? I thought we would be going down to the coast."

"Jennings can take you. I have to go up to Holly Ash. It's

the factory's Gala Day, and one member of the board always has to go. To present the prizes, and all that kind of thing."

"I suppose so. What a nuisance! They didn't waste much time in putting the job onto you." She looked up at him over her glass, her eyes narrowing into the one expression that made her relationship to Monica indisputable. "My sweet, I suppose you really were commandeered for this? There was no element of volunteering?"

Bates hesitated for a moment. He had always made a point of lying to Helen as little as possible, and never when it seemed that her suspicions had already been aroused.

"You have me," he said, "on the hip. Though I don't really know what made you guess it."

She smiled. "I suppose that's one thing clever husbands are never clever about. They can never believe they can be transparent. Where will you be staying? At the Adelphi?"

"With the Cartwrights. It's usual to stay with them."

"The Cartwrights? Common little man and common big woman? Do I have the right couple?"

"You may be right on the vulgarity. You're certainly right on the sizes. It isn't going to be exactly a riotous week end."

"My poor dearest!" She came and rubbed herself against him. "I'm so terribly sorry for you. Driven by your cold luxurious wife from your cold luxurious home to seek comfort in the bosom of the Cartwrights."

Bates grinned. "You've forgotten my cold luxurious daughter."

She smiled, but the smile was fainter. She went to the side-board and set about pouring herself another drink. He said, "I could have got that for you." She did not answer. When she had made her own drink, she brought the whisky bottle to him.

"Will you have another, darling?"

He shook his head. "Not now. I've had my ration before dinner."

She sipped at her glass. There was something she wanted to say, but she was reluctant to come to the point of saying it—he could tell that. She was sitting on a divan; he went over and sat beside her. He put one arm about her shoulders and she leaned in toward his body.

She said very quickly, "Darling, there's something. It seems silly, especially with an old married couple like we are, but I want to say it. I don't want you to get the feeling, ever, that you're not appreciated. Will you promise me that you won't?"

"Solemnly and with all necessary oaths."

"You see, I've always had a thing about us—right from the beginning. I've always thought that perhaps I wasn't the right kind of wife for you, the really right kind. Part of me thought I was being silly, of course. I think I told myself that if I were able to get you that would prove something. I can't remember what. It didn't anyway. The feeling is still there. . . . Frankie, my precious, I suppose I really want to tell you that I love you. As much as ever—more than ever. I want you to know that and believe it. I may not be the exactly right wife, but no other wife could love you more."

He held her firmly. "What's triggered this off? Why this—at this moment? Intimations of mortality? Or what?" He paused. "My going back for the week end to Holly Ash?"

She looked at him mutely. "But why?" he asked. "Why should a little thing like that have this kind of effect?"

He waited for her to answer. She said, at last, "It's silly, isn't it? But I told you it was. Do you remember, right at the beginning, I wanted you to tell me about your life? You never would. I asked you about Holly Ash, but you always changed the subject. I told you everything there was about me. But you came, in uniform, with a blanked-out past. Part of you always has been a stranger."

"The mystery man." He got up and went to the sideboard. "I think I'll have another drink after all. You? No? Helen, my love, you are being silly. You've met my parents. What have you been imagining—a wife and family hidden away in the dark recesses of Holly Ash? Or something even worse?"

"No, of course not. It's just that . . . why wouldn't you talk about it?"

He drank his whisky. "Because there was nothing to say. Because the whole thing was too drab and too wretched to be worth talking about. Most of all because I wanted to forget Holly Ash. You know what the New Towns are like? Holly Ash was a New Town."

"But you want to go back there."

"Yes. The stupidest kind of vanity. I want to go back and show myself—to jeer at them: 'Look how I got away!' Only that. And it's stupid because time doesn't stand still. The people I jeer at won't even know who I am, or what I'm talking about."

For a while there was silence, regulated by the ticking rhythm of the Tompion clock on the wall. Then Helen took his hand.

"Darling. You'll be back for Sunday evening?"

"Of course." He put his thumb against her thin wrist, feeling the swift pulse of life. "Helen, if the whole thing were to be lived over again, I would pick no other wife. Believe me?"

She nuzzled her cheek against his. "Yes, my sweet."

two

Reminiscing on one occasion with Patricia, he asked her: "That first time—in the lake pavilion—why were you so sure, all of you, that I wasn't a keeper? Didn't I sound right?"

Through the open windows they could hear, far below them, the quieter wartime rumble of Knightsbridge traffic. Patricia lay along the window seat, her head in his lap. She said lazily, "You sounded all right. We thought it was a man. John thought it was a tramp who had holed up there. But we knew it wasn't a keeper; the representatives of authority always depend strongly on the personal appearance angle. A keeper would have been before us in the flesh—not a disembodied voice." She laughed. "Remember the plus fours?"

"And the whiskers. I remember them even better. John always had a genius for that kind of thing."

The name, spoken, brought them to a silence. It was Patricia at last who broke it. Her voice was steady but deeper; it always dropped half an octave when her feelings were engaged.

"I hope he's all right. I've been praying—isn't it silly? I'd like to make a bargain, with Whatever there is. Anything to keep him safe. Anything."

"Dear Pat," he said.

She said no more. Silence was heavy on them again. He knew where her thoughts were and his own, shying from that place,

raced back to the old pavilion, to the dark heavy morning, to the very beginning.

For the remainder of that morning, Frank showed them the secret places, the ways through and around and in and out, and they accepted his guidance. It was strange the way they accepted him altogether, so easily and so completely. They welcomed the stranger as he had never known children to do, and even at that early stage he was able to guess the reason: that their own unity was so strong that nothing from outside could in any way imperil it. And John was the symbol of their unity; their leader and their true representative.

John, with the formality that he could so easily adopt, made the introductions.

"We might as well exchange names. I'm John—John Manson. What's your name?"

"Frank Bates," he said. "I live in Ash Cottages. That's just up the road."

John nodded. "We've come to live at Long View. These are my sisters—Patricia and Diana. Pat and Di. Paddy here is Pat's twin. I say—this lake. Have you ever had a boat out on it?"

Frank shook his head. "You know, this is all private. It belongs to the Strellings. We're trespassing being here."

Patrick said, "They can't touch you for trespassing by itself. They've got to show damage. Or illegal entry—like your climbing in and out through that window up there."

"There isn't a boat, any road," Frank said. "I've thought myself of making a raft and trying it out on the lake, but I couldn't get anyone to give me a hand. I'd like to get to that island in the middle."

"Yes," John said thoughtfully. "I suppose we could build a raft, but I should think they're tricky things to steer. There aren't any boats in the boathouse?"

"There was one. It had water in it. The kids sank it by throwing bricks into it."

He had suppressed his own share in the sinking out of a caution that was in itself evidence of the impression the children, and John in particular, had made on him. He was immediately glad.

John said, "Damned hooligans." Frank glanced covertly at the girls; they gave no signs of being shocked by their brother's language. "We might be able to dredge it up again and clean it out. Is there a way into the boathouse?"

"Another window like this, on the other side. I'll show you."

They followed him round, and looked up at the window. John examined it for a moment; then he said, "We really should put a guard on before getting into something like this. What do you think about it, Paddy?"

The smaller girl, Diana, said quickly, "No, John! We don't need to. Look, you can see through the trees to the field. We could see anyone coming a long time before they got here."

Patrick laughed. "Di knows it's her turn to stand guard."

Patricia said, "It isn't fair that Di and I are always the ones who have to stand guard. Paddy could take a turn, anyway."

John was still examining the window. "Fairness isn't the point," he said. "I may need Paddy for things." He swung round. "You're right about the view from here, Di, but how do we know they would come that way? If someone came the other way, round the pavilion, we'd be nobbled."

Frank's intervention was more to display his local knowledge than anything else. He pointed toward the fields.

"That's the only way a keeper would come. If one of them had been in the west end of the wood you would have seen something of him when you came in from Long View. They don't often come in the wood."

John said briefly, "All right. All in. You going first, Frank?"

Diana caught his eye, as he prepared to shin up the side of the boathouse to the window. He heard her say softly, "Thank you."

The brothers pushed the two girls up after him, and then dropped through the window themselves, John bringing up the rear. They prowled about in the semidarkness, examining everything.

Patricia said, her voice sounding deeper than it had done outside, "This is wonderful, isn't it? Fancy finding a place like this right at our own back door. D'you know, citizens, I think perhaps it's going to be more fun here than we thought."

John had lain flat on the platform and was peering down into

the still water beneath him. He rolled up a sleeve and plunged his right arm down below the surface. Then he straightened up and sat cross-legged on the platform's edge.

"I just touched the gunwales," he informed them. "It's hard to say, but the wood feels sound enough. It's worth testing properly."

"How are you going to test it properly?" Frank asked.

"By going down there."

John began stripping his clothes off. He did it quickly, dropping his things in a heap on the platform, and then, without hesitation, lowered himself over the side into the water.

"Going down." They heard him catch his breath as the water received him; the lake was very cold at this time of year. "Any idea how deep it is here, Frank? Never mind, I've touched bottom. About four feet, I should guess. Now, let's have a look at her." He sloshed about; they could see him scrambling over the sunken gunwales of the boat. "I wonder . . . Wait a minute, there's a plank sprung. More than one. God!"

Diana said, "What is it, John? What's happened?"

"Put a foot through. Can't tell whether I've gashed myself or not. I'm afraid it's a washout, citizens. The bottom's quite rotten."

"You don't think perhaps we could patch her up?" Patrick asked.

"No chance at all. I'm coming out. Give me a hand, someone."

Frank and Patrick took a hand each and hauled him out. He stood up with a sigh of relief. "Sling me my vest, Pat. I'll use it to dry myself."

Diana said anxiously, "Let me have a look at your foot."

John towed himself with his vest. "The foot can wait till I've got some clothes on. That water was cold enough."

Diana hovered about him, until he was dressed except for shoes and stockings; at that stage he allowed her to cradle his right foot in her hands, examining it. Even in the dim interior of the boathouse, it was possible to see that the side of the foot had been both bruised and cut.

"Does it hurt?" Diana asked. "Just a minute. I'll bandage it up. I've got a clean handkerchief."

John said, "Good old Di. The girl who always has a clean handkerchief. You ought to carry a first-aid box around with you."

She said seriously, "Do you think I ought?" The others laughed, and after a moment she laughed with them. When she had tied the handkerchief round John's foot, she gently pulled his stocking on over it, and eased his foot into his sandal. He pulled the other stocking and sandal on himself. Then he stood up and trod heavily on the bandaged foot two or three times.

"Practically as good as new. Well, that's one disappointment. You did say this was the only boat there was here, Frank?"

"There's only ever been one here," Frank said.

"There must have been more at one time, when they were using the boathouse and the pavilion. I wonder what happened to the others? I suppose they could have taken them up to the house—or sold them or something." John was wandering around at the rear of the boathouse now. "This door—does it open?"

Frank came to stand beside him. "No. We've never been able to get it open."

"Where does it lead? Into the pavilion, where you were just now?"

"It leads into the pavilion, but not the part where I was. It's a part that's locked off from both sides. There's a locked door in the pavilion, like this."

John said, "This way, Paddy. Run your eagle eye over this. Do you think the Master Cracksman will be able to handle it?"

Patrick bent and examined the lock. "Who's the Master Cracksman?" Frank asked. John smiled, nodding toward Patrick's bent figure. Patrick straightened up again.

"I could almost manage it now, if I had a bit of wire."

"It can wait," John said. "We'll come back this afternoon, and you can bring your things. This is all very interesting. I vote Frank takes us along and shows us the pavilion. Can you come back this afternoon, and join us in a little lock-picking? There wouldn't be time to do anything before lunch. But we can have a look at the pavilion."

"Yes, I can come back," Frank said. "What time? What time do you have your dinners?"

"Back here at two," John said. "Now we'll have a look inside the pavilion."

John, moving very quietly, came round the corner of the boathouse, and was only a couple of yards away when Frank noticed him. He was not sure whether he had avoided starting. The others came round after him.

Frank said, "You're late. I thought you'd got scared."

John's eyebrows lowered. "Scared?" He looked at the watch on his wrist, another indication of his near-adult superiority. "It's only just two. All right, citizens, in we go."

Patrick had brought a set of small tools, like metal toothpicks. He got down to the problem of the locked door while John held a flashlight for him. His face was set, the tip of his tongue tight against one corner of his mouth.

Frank asked, "Where did you learn that sort of thing—how to pick locks?"

Patrick worked away, in silent concentration. John said, "He was apprenticed to a burglar." The girls laughed. "No, as a matter of fact, he learned it from a man who ran a garage, near where we used to live in London. Paddy's always been keen on doing things with his hands. He's pretty good at it."

Patrick said, "This one is hard. It's got rusty. I think I shall have to try forcing it."

"Better not," John said. "I'm opposed to breaking the law in a way that will leave traces behind. That's inviting trouble."

"I only meant—forcing a bit—inside." Patrick was using both hands to twist the slim metal pick sideways. "Something went."

"Did you live right in the middle of London?" Frank asked.

"Near enough the middle. Do you think you've got it?"

"Why did you come up here to Lancashire to live?"

"Because Father had a heart attack. He's got to take it easy. I heard it click then. Do you think . . . ?"

There was another click, and Patrick pushed the door open. The others crowded beside him to see what there was. And there was quite a lot. Most notable were the boats, hauled up close to the beams of the ceiling. There were three of them, replicas of the boat that lay sunk in the boathouse. There were

oars piled in one corner, and cushions in another. A heap of faded silks were seen to be canopies.

A door, this time unlocked, led into a second room, empty except for some tins and odd tackle. John inspected all this carefully.

"Paint," he said. "This may come in very handy. I should think those boats might do with another coat if they've been lying up for any length of time. That one nearest the window will have caught the sun a good deal."

Frank asked, reluctant to believe this, "You mean, you're going to paint those boats that are tied up in the next room?"

"It's only common sense," John said, "to paint them if we're going to use them. We always look after things that we use."

"What do you mean—use them?" Frank asked. "Play in them?"

Patrick said, "On the lake, of course. Where else would you use boats? And what do you mean by play in them? Oh—you mean, pretend that we're sailing in them!"

The contempt for that suggestion was very obvious, although not stressed. Frank felt himself prickling with embarrassment. He said, with anger, "How the hell can you sail the boats on the lake without the keepers finding out? And when they do find out, it's a police job. We'll have the bobbies after us. I don't want to go to a reform school, if you do."

While he had been speaking, he had heard Patricia mouthing after him, "'Ow the 'ell"—not so much in mimicry as in delighted interest. But when he had finished there was no immediate reply from any of them. Not, he thought angrily, that there would be a reply from any of them but John. John had to say anything that needed saying. John was the gaffer.

John said, speaking with quiet reasonableness, "Of course, we should have to take some precautions, but providing we did I don't see that we are likely to get into any kind of trouble. You've pointed out to us that this is an isolated part of the estate, and that there's a good view of any keeper that might come out here, across those fields. All we have to do is to put a lookout on duty whenever we take a boat out."

He grinned at Patricia and Diana. "I think that probably we would all have to take turns at being lookout. Otherwise we

might have a mutiny to face. Anyway, if we did that, and covered our traces fairly well at the boathouse, I don't think we should have any trouble. This is up to you, Frank. You can come in with us, if you want to, or stay out—just as you like. I know you won't give us away, if you do decide to stay out."

Diana said, "Do stay with us, Frank."

The other three watched him with sympathetic interest. They were so confident that they had things to give, nothing to take.

"There's something else besides the keepers," he said. John's attention was obviously closer. "The other kids. They come here to play sometimes. They would talk; the news would get out soon enough."

"Yes," John said. "That's true. That is a problem. We shall have to find some way of dealing with that."

The stiffness in his mother's voice when she replied to Mr. Heddon's suggestion that he should play with the doctor's children had given Frank reason to think that she would oppose any friendship he might form with them, and he did not tell her that he had met them. It was John, a couple of days later, who broke that ice by calling at the cottage. On Saturday morning, as on Thursday, Mrs. Bates did not go to work at the House; she was scouring the flagstones in the yard when John came through the gate. Frank was in the washhouse; he saw him with a sharp and unpleasant stab of apprehension, and did not come out to meet him.

Mrs. Bates straightened up and rested the palms of her hands on her thighs.

She said, "Well, lad, what is it? What do you want?"

"You are Mrs. Bates, aren't you? I'm John Manson. We've come to live at Long View—I suppose Frank will have told you. My mother wondered if we could invite Frank to tea with us this afternoon. Could we, do you think? It would be very kind of you."

Mrs. Bates stood up. She looked John over carefully; he remained easily smiling, unembarrassed. She said at last, "Come on inside, lad. Will you have a cup of tea? Frank! There's a friend of yours called."

"That's extremely good of you," John said. "I should like a cup of tea." Frank came out of the washhouse. "Hello, Frank."

Frank said uneasily, "Hello, John."

They went into the house together. Mrs. Bates went to the fireplace to make the tea from the kettle that always simmered on the hob. John caught sight of Esther, swinging on her perch and crooning to herself.

"You have a parrot!" he said. "May I go and look at her? What's her name?"

"Her name's Esther," Mrs. Bates said. "So you're the son of the new doctor. And you've got some brothers and sisters?"

"Two sisters and a brother."

The tea made, Mrs. Bates brought out the biscuit tin from the larder, and put it down on the table.

"Help yourself. Do you like your tea sweet—milky?"

"Sweet and milky, please. Thank you."

"That's a large enough family for these days. I should have thought your mother would have had enough on looking after that lot, without wanting you inviting others along for tea."

"I suppose she thinks that, with four, one more makes no difference." Mrs. Bates laughed. "We were just going to invite Frank ourselves, but she explained that we must ask you first whether you minded."

"I should think so too. I can see your mother's a sensible woman. You and your brother—will you be going away to school?"

"No. We shall be going to the grammar school with Frank. Paddy will probably be in Frank's form."

Mrs. Bates eyed him again; a close and penetrating scrutiny which he sustained, as before, with unflinching good humor. She turned away at last to attend to the grate with a little up-and-down jerk of her head which Frank knew to be a sign of satisfaction.

"It's up to Frank," she said. "He can go to tea with you if he wants."

When John had gone, Mrs. Bates called him.

"Frank!" He had been preparing to go round the side of the washhouse into the garden. "Come here, son. You didn't tell me you'd met the doctor's kids?"

He looked at her warily. "No, Mam."

"As if I didn't know why! You thought I'd give you the edge of my tongue if you did. I ought to do it, any road, for your being deceitful. You're a queer lad. Maybe you'll find some day that being straight's as important as being clever. Perhaps you'll learn somewhat from this John lad. He's a straight one; I like the looks of him. If the rest of the family's the same, it won't do you any harm to mix with them."

Frank said, "They're all right."

"And you'll have to learn to do things the right way if you're going to get on in life. You might as well learn from other children. The only thing is: if you are going to mix with kids of that kind, mix equal. Don't let them turn up their noses at you, at any time. Not that John would, I shouldn't think. But you watch you don't let it happen."

Frank said, "Yes, Mam. I'll watch."

Mrs. Manson shocked him on the first encounter. She was a thin, bright-eyed woman of medium height, dressed in an old skirt and pullover, and she was smoking a cigarette. He had only once or twice before in his life seen a woman smoking, and a vague but unmistakable label of wickedness had attached itself to those. Mrs. Manson stubbed the cigarette out in an ashtray that was already well provided with cigarette ends, and smiled at him. When she smiled the resemblance to her sons and daughters, otherwise difficult to find, was plain enough. Her hair, he saw, was blonde but streaked with gray.

"I'm very glad your mother let you come, Frank. Now, will you take a message back to her from me? Tell her that I hope in the future you will drop in with the citizens whenever you feel inclined—it will only be a question of taking potluck. I've no objection to mine doing the same at your house, except that you must come here four times for their once. After all, there are four of them. Will you tell her all that?"

"Yes, Mrs. Manson. Thank you for letting me come to tea today."

The injunction to present his formal gratitude had been pressed on him, along with the clean shirt and handkerchief. Mrs. Manson lit another cigarette. She smiled again.

"That was very nice of you, Frank. But it won't be necessary from now on. Both the thanks and the invitations can be taken for granted."

It was ten years later that, on the death of Dr. Manson, Frank was for a short time the man of the household. He and Patricia had traveled back from London together. At this time, John was in the Western Desert; it was automatic that Frank should look after things. He drove back from the registrar's and found Mrs. Manson alone in the house, sitting in the surgery surrounded by papers.

"There you are, Aunt Julia," Frank said. "Cigarette?"

"Frank darling, I was dying. There isn't one in the house. I've sent the girls down to the shops to get some. Was everything all right?"

He took her elbow and lifted her from the old swivel chair in which, he remembered, Dr. Manson had once looked terrifyingly old. The years had made him younger, and now he was dead.

"Come and have a smoke in the parlor; it's more comfortable." She looked with some helplessness at the papers. "They can wait. Leave it till tomorrow, after the funeral. You can sort out the personal stuff and leave the rest to me."

She followed him obediently. It was a dull day and, the blinds being drawn, the parlor was in deep shadow. He sat her in one of the armchairs and himself took another. Her cigarette end glowed as she inhaled.

"How conventional death makes us," she said. "Not like birth. I remember when the twins were born, Oliver picked each of them up in turn and tossed them so high that the mid-wife swore Paddy came down with a patch of ceiling white on his behind. I thought he'd gone mad; it turned out that since he'd known it was going to be twins he'd developed an obsession that they were going to be Siamese. He was relieved almost to the point of insanity that they should be separate. There are so many things one can do about birth."

"What convention are you observing at the moment?" Frank asked.

She laughed harshly, and broke off into her smoker's cough. "It's the one I was just going to observe. The dependent female

to the sustaining male: 'I don't know what I would do without you.' Quite honestly, I don't. I've never particularly thought of myself as being the dependent-female type, but then I've never realized how much I depended on Oliver. If you weren't here I should probably be sitting back and thinking to myself, 'The funeral arrangements—oh, yes, Oliver will see to them.' And then panicking madly."

"It's easier for someone from outside to deal with things."

"No, it's not that. It's the way you handle things. You go about them the way John would if he were here—with what I can only describe as a large-handed confidence. Neither of you has particularly large hands, but I always think of you as having them—massive hands with terribly capable fingers. You're quite a lot like John."

"And quite a lot different."

"Yes, of course. You must be, Frank. Sitting here, I've been thinking. I met you first in this room, didn't I? The day you came for tea. I can remember what I thought about you. I thought: 'What a very uninteresting little boy—how did the citizens come to pick him up?'"

"I can understand that."

"Can you? Yes, I suppose it takes a dedicated egotist to think of himself as innately interesting. But I observed you closely in those early weeks. It didn't take long to see where it was you excelled."

Frank looked round the room. Patricia in cap and gown. One of Diana's nursing certificates. John in the front row of the University First XV. Framing things, especially photographs, had always been a minor vice of Mrs. Manson. Patrick, in boxing gloves, squaring up to the world.

"I'm interested, Aunt Julia," Frank said. "I know, myself, of course, but I'm interested in a second opinion."

"Oh, Frank!"

"I'm sorry." That last sentence had come out of Dr. Manson's stock. "It was thoughtless of me."

"No, of course not. Me being silly." She smiled, and he thought: that's the real gift—to wound without thinking and be forgiven without asking. Why? Because of what they are, what I am. "Where you excel? It didn't take me long to find out. I've

never known anybody who learned things so quickly, with so little effort. I guessed it that first afternoon, over tea."

"Yes, I was watching for knives and forks and so on."

"Well, naturally you were. I was expecting that you would be watching. But it was so hard to catch you at it. That afternoon I put things to the credit of your experience rather than your adaptability. It was some little time before I understood just how adaptable you were. And I saw then that you had adapted yourself into the citizens right from the start. They didn't usually make friends outside—children, anyway. I should have guessed that you must be some kind of chameleon to be able to grow into that little private circle."

"Not a compliment, Aunt Julia. A chameleon—taking color from the surroundings, giving none."

"It was a limited comparison. You are distinctive enough all right, Frank. But you have this gift for settling in. John again—he settles in by—by beaming himself at people. A kind of lighthouse. You're more like a mirror; reflecting them, but reflecting them with a difference. They bounce off you, and you change them. I saw that it was something like that which must have attracted the children."

"It's funny," he said. "At that time—I felt very much on the outside of what you call that little private circle. I didn't feel I had grown into it. I didn't feel I ever would."

"I knew you were already a part of it." She smiled. "Do you remember—I warned you?"

"I remember."

A small, dark, watchful boy, sitting on the edge of the large armchair, with a clean shirt and a clean handkerchief.

Mrs. Manson said, "If you are going to have much to do with my children, Frank, I think I must give you a warning. Don't let them browbeat you—John especially. Stand up for yourself, and take no nonsense from them."

Frank said gravely, "No, Mrs. Manson."

Naturally enough it was Patrick with whom he first got on terms of intimacy. Patrick, two months younger than Frank, was in his form at the grammar school, while John was in a higher grade by reason of his year's seniority. The three boys

traveled on the tram to school together, and spent the mid-morning and midday breaks together, but it was not long before the two younger boys, sitting side by side for the rest of the day, had a fund of shared experience which could challenge the deeper common fund of the two brothers.

John did not show any signs of minding this. Frank became his second lieutenant, and in general he made a point of treating the two juniors on equal terms. He used them differently for their different skills; Patrick when mechanical skill or inventiveness was required—Frank for his local knowledge and, to an increasing extent, for his ability to carry out roughly sketched plans. His first important use of Frank was in connection with his scheme to make the lake into a private preserve for the citizens.

He said, “I’ve been thinking of what you said—about the other kids coming along to the lake and seeing us, and talking. We shall have to do something about that.”

It was several days later, still in the Easter holidays, and all five of them were in the boat pavilion, painting one of the boats which they had let down from the ceiling. John and Frank were working together at one end.

Frank said, “What are you going to do?”

John put his brush down. He explained, in his rather grown-up precise voice. Frank listened, doubting him.

“You wouldn’t try that,” he said. “And if you did, you wouldn’t get away with it.”

John smiled. “But if it did come off—you will agree that would scare them off for some time? They would keep away from this part?”

Frank nodded slowly. “We used to go up to the Strellings’ gardens, until one of the gardeners caught us once. That was two or three years ago. No one’s been back since. But it wouldn’t work, anyway.”

“All you have to do,” John said, “is to get them along here at the right time. Do you think you can do that?”

Frank considered. “There’s one way of doing it.”

“Right. You can leave the rest to me.”

Frank was received back with lukewarm friendliness by Ron-

nie, and with covert hostility by Sid. The girls seemed quite indifferent. He joined the group when they were playing house in the ruins beside the tram lines, and at first made no contribution to the general conversation. It was Sid who gave him the opening he would otherwise have had to make.

He said, "I hear you've got some pals come to Long View, Frank. The new doctor's kids will be going to the grammar."

"I saw them up at the lake," Frank said. "They'd been in the boathouse, I think."

"Eh, that's our boathouse!" Sid said. "They oughtn't to be in there. We won't have to stand for that."

Ronnie said, "No. We'll have to chase them off."

It was a general threat; too general. Frank said, "You might be scared of them. One of them's bigger than us."

Sid said, "We're not scared of any Londoners, are we, Ronnie? Nor grammar school kids neither. They can't fight, none of them."

Frank said, "We could go along to the lake now. They might be there today. They probably think they can do what they like there."

Ronnie said, "I don't know that I want to go up to the lake now."

Frank had been watching Sid; he could guess his reaction. If they did go along now and put a scare in the doctor's kids, there would be Frank on their side. It was an advantage they might as well take: it was not one that was likely to last and it might even be replaced by the disadvantage of Frank's going over to the side of the boys he would be going to school with. Sid had an eye for that kind of stock-taking.

Sid said, "I think Frank's right. I think we ought to go up to the lake. If they're there we can scare them off. And we haven't been up in the boathouse just lately, any road."

Ronnie said, "If you like."

He accepted Sid's initiative as he had once accepted Frank's. Climbing behind them through the breach in the wall, Frank hoped John's scheme would succeed, and well enough to frighten them—really frighten them. The girls were tagging along behind them. Everyone was here except Norman, and he, being within a few months of leaving school, did not count in

any case. They made through the wood toward the lake, and he allowed Sid to lead the way.

It was midafternoon. The water was peaceful, reflecting fitful sunlight, and the trees on the island waved in a fresh breeze. They were about twenty-five yards from the boathouse when the figure stepped quietly round the corner and stood watching their approach. Frank, who had been waiting for this, saw him first. He said nothing, leaving the others to find out for themselves. He tingled with the excitement of the situation. Suddenly Sid stopped.

"Who's that?" he asked. His voice was uneasy.

The figure by the boathouse spoke before anyone else could say anything. Knowing John's voice and knowing that it would be John, Frank was not deceived, but without both of those things known he might have been. John had put on an exaggerated clipped accent, impressively adult.

He said, "Come along here, you. Let me have a look at you."

Ronnie said, whispering, "Eh, let's run!"

Frank said quickly, "Don't be a fool. If we run, he'll come after us. The keepers know where we live."

They remained irresolute. John said again, "Come along here!" The authority in his voice brought them dragging forward. John said, "That's better. Let me have a good look at you."

As they came nearer, Frank could see more of the disguise John had adopted. He was wearing baggy brown plus four trousers with yellow socks, and a tan jacket. He had put on horn-rimmed spectacles and a blond mustache that convincingly matched his hair. He did not look merely like an adult; he looked like an adult of eccentric appearance and temperament.

The group of children halted some yards from him. They did so on Frank's initiative; good as John's disguise was, he wanted to keep the rest from inspecting it at close quarters. But John waved them up.

"Right up here. Come on." They straggled forward. "Now!" John's eye sought out Ronnie. "You're the biggest. What's your name?"

Ronnie said in a small voice, "Ronald Ashbridge, sir."

"Very well, Master Ashbridge. You can answer a few ques-

tions on behalf of the others. You are aware this is private property, and that you are, in fact, trespassing?"

"Yes. That is—we haven't done anything. Nothing wrong."

John brought a hand from behind his back, and Frank saw that he was carrying a yellow cane walking stick. He pointed this casually in the direction of the broken window of the boathouse.

"I suppose you are going to tell me that you haven't been responsible for breaking that window? And the window in the pavilion?"

The original hand behind the window breaking had been Norman's, in the days when he was the leader of the little gang. Ronnie said quickly, "No, sir. We didn't break the windows. None of us did."

"But you've been in there, through the window. It was you who sank the boat."

This charge being a true one, Ronnie reacted even more swiftly into protestations of innocence. "No, sir! We didn't sink the boat. It was done already. We didn't sink it."

John created a small pause, while he gazed, fixedly stern, at Ronnie. He took the bottom of the cane in his left hand, and bent it.

"So you have been through the window," he said at last. "You must have been, since you know about the boat. Isn't that so?"

Ronnie's voice was shaking. "Yes, sir."

"Were you aware that that is a criminal offense?"

"No, sir!"

"Well, let me inform you of it now. It comes into the same class as burglary, and if Mrs. Strelling should decide to take it up with the police, then you would be for the reform school—the lot of you. Do you understand that? Mrs. Strelling has asked me to keep an eye on the place for her. I think I can say that she is prepared to overlook your offense on this occasion, but you can rest assured that she will not overlook it twice. You follow me?"

"Yes," Ronnie said. "Yes, sir."

"That being so—" John said. He repeated the phrase, with obvious relish. "That being so—you know what you may expect

if I, or any of the keepers, should find you in this part of the estate in the future. And you can count yourselves very lucky to have got away with it this time." He paused again. When he spoke it was in a voice so close to his own normal voice, with such intensity of feeling, that Frank was half afraid that even now the others would see the trick.

"You filthy destructive little swines," John said. "Clear off now." His voice resumed its pose. "Clear off. And be sharp about it."

Frank made his own way back to the boathouse after leaving the others by the tram lines. Patricia, looking out of the window, greeted him.

"Come on up. I hoped you would be longer. I've been given a spell off painting to wait for you. John thought it best to keep a lookout on until you had come back with a report."

He climbed in through the small window and she helped him down inside. She was a thin girl—bony-kneed and sharp-elbowed—and her hands clutching him were thin and long-fingered. When, as a woman, she fleshed so admirably, there were still the long thin fingers to recall the schoolgirl.

He said, "Did you watch it all?"

"Every bit. Wasn't John good? The jacket was a bit on the loose side, but I thought he looked most impressive taken altogether."

"He was all right. He fooled them."

"Did he?" The fingers clutched his arm, digging in. "Good scheme!"

John looked up from his painting; he had changed back into his own clothes but had left the mustache on his upper lip.

"Well? How did it go? Were they scared?"

"Yes. You scared them all right. Your voice slipped a bit at the end, but none of them noticed anything. They won't come back here for a few years."

John said with satisfaction, "Right. That puts things just as we want them. We should be ready for our first sail in a couple of weeks."

Patrick put down his brush. "Two weeks? We'll have this work finished this afternoon. What are we going to wait for?"

"For you to do a little job," John told him. "How on earth

do you think we are going to launch this with that wreck blocking the way in the boathouse? We'll have to get it up."

"We could drag this along the side and topple it into the water just beyond the wreck. There's room. That's what I thought we were going to do."

"And how about getting it back again afterward?"

"I thought we could leave it in the water. Most of it would be inside the boathouse; there would only be the bows sticking out."

"The bows are quite enough to be spotted by a keeper. Everything we do is going to be done without leaving traces behind us. That wreck has got to be cleared away before we bring this boat out."

"We could smash it up, probably," Frank suggested. "Or get into the water and drag it out into the lake and leave it on the bottom."

John looked at him. His face had something of the expression that had accompanied his last outburst to Ronnie and the others. For all the ludicrousness of the mustache on his young face, he looked a little frightening.

"It isn't much harder to do something useful," he said. "It may even be easier. Anyway, that's what we are going to do." He turned to Patrick. "Come on, Paddy—think of something useful. How are we going to lift her?"

Patrick jerked his brush in the direction of the next room.

"Length of rope in there. We could probably get it underneath her, passing it through the rowlocks to prevent slipping. That's if the rowlocks haven't gone—if they have, I could probably rig a couple of temporary rings on the gunwales. Once we've got the rope under her it should be easy."

"There's mud underneath," John commented. "And she's been in it for some time. I should think she's well stuck."

"Fix one end of the rope," Patrick said. "Screw a pulley in the wall on the other side and run that end of the rope over it. If all five of us got on the rope end then, I can't see we would have much difficulty. Once we've shifted her from the bottom, Frank and I can go round to the other side while you stay with the girls—it should be easy enough to haul her out after that."

John had been listening intently. "It sounds good. We'll try it that way."

Patricia once said to him, "The happiest time of our lives. Then."

They were boating on the Serpentine. The morning was hazy now—they had had to wait for the office to open to buy their tickets—but it was already very warm and in a few hours the weather would be stifling hot. They were both in uniform, Patricia as an A.T.S. junior officer, Frank as a lieutenant. Frank had rowed under the bridge toward the Kensington Gardens end, and they were alone on the dull quiet water. Patricia lay back, trying to make herself comfortable, watching Frank.

He said, "Why not now?"

"Why not? But it isn't, and there wouldn't be any point in pretending it was."

"Poor old Pat," he said. "Regressing toward her sunlit infancy at the ripe old age of twenty-one."

She shifted awkwardly. "Damn these boards. Next time I'll bring some cushions."

"You're well enough cushioned as it is."

"Compliment? I suppose so. Thank you. No, but frankly, Frank . . ." They both smiled at the old catchphrase. "Looking at it honestly, we were happier then. I suppose we were less complicated. It was all fun."

"Isn't it now?"

"It spoils the fun when you can't get rid of a nagging worry about possible consequences. I suppose I see that rather more sharply than you do. But things are so much more complicated now—you must see that."

He rested his oars. "I don't think I enjoyed myself then, particularly. The business of taking the boat out on the lake—I fell in with it, of course, but it scared me."

"It scared all of us. That was part of the fun."

"So there were possible consequences in that fun too? What you are saying, Pat, is that you have changed—your eye is more on what may be going to happen, and less on what is happening."

"Perhaps so. Does it affect things? I suppose we all have to

grow up, and when we grow up we can't help looking back with nostalgia. And when you have been happy in the past . . . I don't suppose everybody has that kind of happiness to look back on."

"I've never wanted to look back," Frank said. "I can't imagine ever wanting to."

"I wonder what you've set your sights on?" she asked lazily. "I wonder if you know, yourself. Something immense, probably. If you ever get it, you will be able to look back. Not before, I should think."

She was trailing one hand in the water. He smiled at her.

"I shouldn't describe you as something immense. Pleasantly bulky would be a better way of putting it."

She laughed. "I'm talking about things you haven't got. The really important things—like becoming a brigadier."

"The war might almost last long enough, at its present rate. That's a dismal thought. Why pick me out to have overwhelming ambitions? What about yourself?" She smiled. "What about John?"

"John's ambitions are on the surface. He isn't as complex as you are, darling."

Frank took up the oars again; they had drifted to within a dozen feet of the north bank. There was a sound of sheep bleating, and of airplanes, as somnolent. Peace in the heart of a war.

"I can't accept that," he said. "Even if it were true, you could not know it. For one thing, you see us in different ways. John's your brother, while I'm . . ."

"Mm? I'd like to hear you describe yourself, in your personal capacity. Seducer? Lover? Suitor? Boy friend, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. It makes a difference, anyway. Any one of those would seem more complex than a brother does."

"I suppose so. But I was thinking of what you said—about not wanting to look back—about my having changed . . . the implication being that you hadn't. Your eye always was on what might be going to happen, even in the old lake pavilion. So in a way you were grown up then, when the rest of us were children. I don't imagine you've stopped growing up—people don't, do they? So I think you must be more complex than the rest of us."

"The still deep-running waters," he said. "Concealing what?" She was not smiling now. "I don't know."

"If you don't, no one does. No one else has been as near."

He pulled back toward the bridge. She sat watching him from the bows and did not speak.

They fixed a Saturday morning for the launching and the first trip under their control of the *Charmian*—she had carried that name in faded gold lettering which Patricia and Diana had painstakingly renewed. The wreck in the boathouse had been dragged out of the water, cleaned out, and hauled through into the pavilion; John held to a slim hope of patching it up. They had found rollers which made the actual moving of the boats comparatively easy. The *Charmian* slid forward down the ramp into the green water without any hitch or difficulty, and rode lightly at the end of the painter. The citizens watched her with pride.

John said, "Now we have to decide who stays behind on the maiden trip. There must always be someone on watch when we have her out."

Frank had a feeling that now, here, they would turn together to look at him—exclude him, the stranger. He tensed into preparing anger.

Patrick felt in his pocket. "Here they are." He brought out five thin strips of cardboard, four long and one short. "I vote Frank holds them."

"The unlucky person who draws the short strip stays behind," John said. He paused. "That would be really hard luck, though, wouldn't it? We'll make two trips, and the one who misses the first can go on the second. So we shall have to have a second lookout." He took one of the long strips and tore it in half. "Very short strip—lookout on the first voyage; short strip—lookout on the second. Fair enough? Here you are, Frank. You hold them."

Frank turned away from them, juggling the strips, and faced them again with the ends of the strips showing from between his fingers. They crowded round him, solemnly anxious. John said, "The girls first. I'll draw last."

Patricia drew a long strip. Diana, with a small cry of dismay,

found herself clutching a smaller one. Patrick took them and compared them.

"It's not the very short one, Di. You go on the first trip anyway."

Patrick himself drew a long one. He let his breath out in a sigh and tossed the cardboard into the water. John looked carefully at the two ends remaining on offer between Frank's fingers. One protruded a little more than the other. He looked at Frank's impassive face; then he drew that one which was apparently the shorter. It was a long strip.

Patrick said, "Bad luck, Frank. But we'll just run her out to the island and have a look at it, and come back directly."

"We won't be more than half an hour altogether," John said. "We might make time for a third trip this morning. If so, I'll stay behind for that one. All right, the rest of you. All aboard. You get in, Paddy, and help the girls down."

When the others were in, John jumped down himself. He took an oar, and looked up at Frank, standing above them on the platform.

"We'll push off when you give us the all-clear from next door," he said. "Have a good look round first. We don't want to take any chances."

Frank turned and left them. The lookout's post was at the window in the room where the boats were strung up. The view was clear through the scatter of trees to the pastures which stretched to the Manor lawns, more than half a mile away. The window on the room's opposite side looked over the lake. The lookout had a whistle. On seeing anyone approaching in the direction of the lake, he was to go to the second window and whistle the alarm. A single blast was the signal that a stranger was in sight—three short blasts would indicate that the lookout had missed the first signs of the approach and that the stranger would be there before they could get back to the boathouse. This, of course, was one of John's refinements. If that signal were given, the boat would be pulled in on the opposite side of the island and the crew would hide there until a long blast from the lookout told them it was all right to bring the *Charmian* back.

Frank looked out toward the Manor. There was nothing in

sight but a herd of Jersey cows, mostly reclining. He shouted through to the boathouse, "All right. You can go."

He heard John's voice, muffled, "Push off, Paddy," and Patrick's more boisterous cry, "Heave ho, me hearties!" There was the scrape of wood, and the voices diminishing. He waited for a couple of minutes, his eyes on the empty fields and the cows, and then went across and looked out of the other window. The *Charmian* was pulling away steadily toward the island.

He was the unwanted, the outsider. The feelings with which he watched the small boat and its crew of four growing smaller on the placid waters of the lake were beyond his conscious gauging. He could not even be sure whether he thought that he had been cheated over the drawing of the lots, or not. There was no way in which he could imagine the cheating to have been carried out, but it was as hard to believe that fate also was against him, conspiring to exclude. He would be on the next trip; but an island is only discovered once. With an effort, he left that window and returned to his lookout post.

When he looked again, they were disappearing behind the island; John, he realized, would be taking the precaution of beaching the *Charmian* in that position where she would be least likely to be seen. His imagination was with them. They—who had been living here no longer than a few weeks—would be climbing out of the boat onto the island, his island. His fists clenched of their own accord, until his fingernails were hurting his palms.

He alternated between the lookout post and the window on to the lake. He saw their figures appear on this side of the island, and one of the girls waved toward the pavilion. It was true, as Patricia was to point out so many years later, that even then he was, in many ways, grown up. His feelings were as bitter as they would ever be, bitter with a calmness that is generally beyond the reach of a child. An ordinary child would have been incapable of concealing the bitterness he felt; and yet here, by himself, unwatched, Frank still gave no outward sign.

They were coming back at last. He surveyed the outside world from his lookout post with care again, and some regret. There was no one in sight. The *Charmian* had survived her maiden trip undetected. He was just leaving to go toward the

other window again when, incredulously, he heard the strange voice. A woman's voice, high-pitched, calling—calling from close at hand.

He went quietly and cautiously to the window. The *Charmian* was less than twenty yards away, with John and Patrick rowing, and Patricia steering. To the left of the window, the balcony from the other half of the pavilion jutted out. The woman was standing on the balcony, watching the boat come in. She was elderly, tall, with nearly white hair. She called, "Children! Bring that boat up here, will you?"

Frank saw John look toward her. For a moment he was plainly considering. Then, at a word to Patricia, the *Charmian* began to swing round toward the balcony.

The *Charmian* drifted almost directly beneath the pavilion. The woman said, "I imagine you will be the children of the new doctor. Manson, isn't it?"

John said, "Yes, ma'am." His voice was clear and untroubled.
"I'm Mrs. Strelling."

There was a silence. Frank's mind leaped into fierce exultation. He had been passed over for the trip, and now they had been caught. If he kept quiet enough, he would be missed altogether. They had been caught. They had been caught.

Mrs. Strelling spoke again. "A rather strange story came to my ears. The father of one of the local children is a groom at my stables. Apparently his little girl told him that she and some other children had been caught playing near the boathouse by a strange man, who told them that he was looking after things for me, and threatened them with prosecution if they came here again. The man came to me to apologize for his daughter. I thought it best to accept the apology and pass it off, but in fact I was rather surprised. I made inquiries of the keepers, and found that neither of them had been concerned."

In the boat the girls were openly nervous. Patrick less clearly so. John gave no sign of anything but courteous attention to what was being said.

"I thought it worth while," Mrs. Strelling said, "to have a look at the boathouse and the pavilion myself. It's some years since I had been down here. I found very clear signs of occupation."

John said: "We have done no damage, ma'am."

"I noticed that. I noticed that you had been doing some much-needed painting, and that the old boat had been dragged in from the boathouse. By the way, I am still interested in the identity of the strange man."

"It was me, ma'am," John said. "I took some clothes of my father's, and there was a mustache we used for theatricals last winter."

"Was it, indeed! I hadn't guessed that. I could see yesterday that a launching was imminent, and I thought it might be this morning, so I came down early myself. It won't do my rheumatism any good, but even at my time of life curiosity can be stronger than an ache in the joints. Well, I've satisfied it. What's your name, Master Manson?"

"John." He pointed around the boat. "My brother, Patrick. My sisters, Patricia and Diana."

"You have a good deal of self-possession, John," Mrs. Strelling said.

"Our parents don't know anything about this."

"And your watcher, in the boathouse?" She nodded her head in Frank's direction and he dodged back, conscious only of fear now. "Another brother?"

She must have caught sight of him at the window, or heard him shout to the others. For that matter she had probably watched the five of them arrive. He waited for John to answer.

"No. Not a brother. We asked him to help us. He hasn't been out in the boat."

Mrs. Strelling nodded. "You seem to handle it very competently. I have been considering what I should do. I don't propose to invite you formally to use the boats; there might be an accident and I'm not going to be held responsible for that. On the other hand, I'm glad rather than sorry to see the place—and the boats—in use, especially since you seem to be taking care of things. It would be nice if this lake were to hold pleasant memories for you; it doesn't for me."

She paused, looking out over their heads at the still waters and the island.

"I have keys, of course," she said. "I shall go back now, and leave the keys in the door. Should you ever get tired of playing

here, perhaps you would bring the keys back to me at the Manor. I shall pass word on to the keepers."

"You're very kind, ma'am," John said. "We will look after things."

"I know that. You are very kind too, you know. I shan't come here to the lake, but I shall be able to think of it—with pleasure even. Good-by. I've forgotten your names already, except John's, but good-by, all of you."

They chorused their good-bys to her. She paused again before turning away. She smiled. "I think we'll keep the strange man a secret, shall we?"

She left the balcony. Watching the four blond heads in the sunshine, as the *Charmian* was rowed in toward the boathouse, Frank made himself ready to join in their rejoicing.

3

He was called to the chairman's office in the early afternoon.

Parker said, "Sit down, Frank. I don't want to keep you. You're catching a train this afternoon, aren't you? The three-forty?"

Bates nodded. "Helen's in town. She's picking me up here and driving me to Euston."

"Good show. I hope she'll find time to pop in and say hello."

Parker used expressions belonging by right to an age group younger than his own, but they did not seem incongruous. He was a heavy man in his late fifties, but his hair was still very dark, and the flesh had only slightly jowled beneath the square and jutting chin. There was rather more white in his eyebrows; Bates would have been inclined to suspect that Parker might be in the habit of dyeing his hair but for the fact that the man's nature made it certain that he would not have failed to dye the eyebrows too. His chief quality as a director had always been that he was painstaking.

Parker tapped his desk; Bates saw that his report on the United Carbide proposals was resting on the blotting pad.

"I've read this," Parker said. "In fact, I've read it three times. You've given the proposals a hell of a rocket, haven't you?"

Bates said, "Granted my assumptions about the American situation, I don't think the criticisms I make are too severe. The firm stands to lose a lot of money if the scheme goes through."

Parker nodded. "I had a word with the F.T. about some of the figures you quote; I hadn't seen them published over here."

"I don't believe they have been. I have an American source."

"You'll have to put me onto it. The F.T. confirmed you. I think I shall have to congratulate you, Frank. You probably know that Arnold has been pushing this. If you hadn't come out against it, I'm fairly sure that no one else would. Speaking for myself, I was prepared to take the figures that he gave."

Arnold was McIvar. Bates watched Parker with doubt still, but with a good deal of satisfaction. With anyone else he would have suspected the fair words as being a cover for something else; Parker lacked even that elementary subtlety. It looked as though he were not going to try to defend McIvar's position.

"Talking of figures," Bates said, "I could let you have a rough estimate of the amount we would be likely to lose—at any rate over the next three years. I've been working them out."

"Could you, then? But that's part of the fundamental question of the kind of action we should take to meet the situation." We, Bates noted. "I could have a word with Arnold, and get him to agree to have the whole thing quietly dropped. There shouldn't be any difficulty about that. Or we can let it go through to the next meeting, and you can deal with it there. I think it's your option, Frank."

So soon. McIvar tossed to the young and hungry wolf. He saw what Parker was bidding for now. The report had convinced him that Bates, Sir Joshua's natural heir, was not to be crowded or frightened out. Parker was buying his own security. When Sir Joshua died, and the power was transmitted, he could hope that a friendly Bates would not fight for the chairmanship which must eventually come to him. Parker had never been an expert in wolf psychology.

Naturally he would prefer to be able to warn McIvar off

and avoid the fuss. The offer, Bates recognized, was designed to bring out his gentlemanly feelings; he was expected to choose the quiet unostentatious victory. He glanced at the oil painting of his father-in-law on the wall.

"I take it that if I think it best to let this go through to the meeting, I can count on your support there?"

Parker said, "Of course." He looked at Bates expectantly.

"Then I should prefer to adopt that course." Parker's expression did not substantially change, but Bates saw his eyelids droop. That was the first shock for him; it would not be the last. He smiled. "You realize it's not a question of Arnold personally. It's simply that I think the business of the firm is best conducted when everything is on the table. If this were just to be dropped . . . one of the other directors might want to know why, and things might become difficult. Perhaps very difficult. You see what I'm driving at?"

Parker nodded. He saw. He saw that McIvar was to be thrown in public and irrevocably. Bates wondered whether even now he might not draw back; but the hope of appeasing his eventual usurper was too strong.

"You're probably right. Arnold was at fault in committing himself so strongly to this without going into it more thoroughly. It can't be helped." His eyelids drooped again. "We'll leave it at that, then. When are you and Helen going to come over for an evening's bridge? Cynthia was saying only yesterday that it was a long time since we'd seen you."

It was bald and ugly, explicable only by the fact that Parker was unaware how very visible his motives were. Weep not for McIvar, Bates thought. Weep not, indeed. McIvar would be avenged.

"You know how it is," Bates said. "We're both very busy. When I have a few hours free, I invariably find that Helen is tied up with politics. We should be delighted to take you up. Perhaps we shall manage it someday."

"Always welcome. Why don't you go in for politics, Frank? In my view you're just the right kind of man for it."

Especially, Bates thought, at a time when politics was proving itself a full-time job. He grinned.

"Perhaps I will, when I can find the time." He paused. "In

another twenty years, say. I'd better be getting along, I think. Helen may be roaming round the building in search of me."

Helen arrived as he was finishing signing his letters. Miriam, waiting for the folder, said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Bates," with enthusiasm.

Helen kissed him when she had gone. "I do approve of your Miriam, darling. Just what I would have chosen myself. Deeply devoted to you in such a nicely clinical way. Are you ready to leave?"

"Quite ready. By the way, Peter Pan's been asking after you. He hoped you might have time to pop in and give him a big hello."

"And have I?"

"No. Not unless you are personally anxious for the treat." Helen made a face. "I think we'll slip out quietly."

In the train he had a compartment to himself. There was a little time before it was due to leave. Helen settled herself in the opposite corner and looked at him.

"Magazines, cigarettes—have I forgotten anything?"

"Apart from half a dozen Circassians, I can't think of anything. I'm very well looked after."

"You're very happy this afternoon." Her voice was wistful. "More so than usual."

He knew what she was thinking. "I'm the dog let off the leash. See my tongue hanging out with excitement."

"Darling, don't be disgusting. I hope you have a nice time."

"Believe it or not," he said, "I haven't thought of Holly Ash once this afternoon. Apart from the difficulty of finding a substitute so late in the day, I would probably have canceled the whole thing."

"You've been thinking of it subconsciously," she said firmly. "My love, you look so pleased with yourself. You should see you."

"I'd rather see you. You know, you weren't cut out for behavior analysis. I suppose I am pleased. But it's not Holly Ash. I've had Peter Pan figuratively licking my boots. Since then I've been admiring myself in the shine from them, like the mice in the ad."

"Precious, how morbidly exciting! You enjoyed it?"

"They needed polishing." He looked at his watch. "I'd better push you out. We're almost due to leave."

She leaned against the door of the compartment to talk to him through the window. He caught her shoulders and pushed her back gently.

"You'll get your costume filthy."

"Doesn't matter." They heard the whistle; she stretched on tiptoe to be kissed. "I'll meet you in on Sunday afternoon."

"You spoil me," he said. "Look after yourself, and the family."

"Have a good time!"

He watched her waving until the curve of the line swung her out of view. Then he sat back, in solitary comfort.

three

During that summer, Frank grew into being an integral member of the citizens.

He spent a lot of time at Long View; his mother mentioned this once or twice but only in mild criticism. She had come to the conclusion, he guessed, that the friendship was a good thing for him, and she had always shown more concern with his advantages than his presence. He did not resent this now; it served his purpose.

They roamed widely during the summer holidays. The Mansons all had bicycles, and they had brought with them from London a fifth, broken-down bicycle which had been John's before he was given a new one. Patrick slaved over this to put it in a fit state of repair for Frank to use, and after that they were all released into the network of country lanes that broke away from the few main arteries. Mrs. Manson would make them up sandwich lunches, in small boxes smelling faintly of the surgery, and they would eat them in high cool beech woods, or lying at the edge of ripening cornfields, or looking out over the Irish Sea.

It was very peaceful. They were preserved from the usual children's squabbles by the fact of John's clear and easily used authority. It rested on a firm basis of impartiality. John exer-

cised his power in a way that was sometimes ruthless but always without rancor.

Patricia came under the ban one evening during the holidays. The following day they were to cycle to the coast, at Formby Point, and they were cleaning and checking their bicycles, under Patrick's supervision, in preparation for the run. While they worked on them, they discussed the best route for them to take. Patricia, who loved the sea, wanted to make directly for it and then ride north. Frank was opposed to this; their best course, he thought, was inland, coming out to the sea actually at the point.

He said: "It's a better road, and quicker. We'll take all day getting there the other way."

"Of course we won't!" Patricia said. "It's very little different from the other. Look at the map. There isn't more than three miles in it."

"Maps don't tell you all that much. They don't tell you what kind of a road it is. How can a book tell you that?"

John said, "You're the local expert, Frank."

Patricia said, with withering eleven-year-old scorn, "The local expert! The one who knows everything. 'Ow can a boo-ook tell you that?'" It was mimicry this time all right, clever and savage mimicry. "Why don't you go back and join the rest of the local experts? We can get on well enough without you. We don't need you and we don't want you!"

Patrick began saying, "Pat! You little . . ."

John interrupted him. "Say you're sorry to Frank, Pat. Come on. Don't waste any time about it."

Patricia said incredulously, "Sorry? I'm not a bit sorry. Why should he push in and start telling us what we ought to do? If we let him go around with us, he might at least keep his mouth shut."

John looked at his watch. "Since you're in a temper, we'll give you five minutes to cool down. If you apologize to Frank inside five minutes we'll forget about it. If you don't—you won't come out with us at all tomorrow."

"Don't bother!" Patricia left her bicycle resting upside down on its handlebars, and walked angrily to the door. "I'm not going to apologize. You needn't look at your watch."

The others carried on with their work. After a while, John announced, "That's five minutes."

Frank was delayed the next morning, and got to Long View to find John, Patrick and Diana waiting at the front with their bicycles. He skidded his own bicycle across the graveled drive to join them.

"Arrived at last," John said. "We're all here now. We can be off."

His words emphasized rather than covered the gap; without Patricia's thin restless figure, her untidy near-auburn hair, they were so obviously not all present. Patrick said nothing, but he looked uncomfortable. It was Diana who said, "Are we really going to go without Pat, John? Must we?"

John said, "She didn't apologize. That's all there is to it."

Diana looked up toward the window of the bedroom that she and Patricia shared; the eyes of the others followed hers. Patricia was standing looking out of the window. Even from here, outside and below, it was possible to guess her utter misery. She saw them looking up at her, and made no move.

"She would apologize if you asked her now," Diana said. "I'm sure she would. She does want to come with us. Could I go back and ask her?"

John said, "You heard what I said last night, Di. I told her that unless she apologized inside five minutes she couldn't come with us today. She didn't, and she can't. That's all there is to it."

Patrick broke his gaze away from the forlorn figure at the window. "But if Frank were willing to accept an apology now—isn't that all that matters? What about it, Frank? Can she come if she says she's sorry?"

John broke in before Frank could reply. "It's not a question of what Frank says. If a decision is made, it's got to be kept to. Now, as we're all ready, we might as well get along."

It would never occur, Frank realized, either to Patrick or Diana to question the right of John to make such decisions. Nor, for that matter, to Patricia herself. The question was in his own mind, but he was confident of his ability to keep it there. They cycled down the drive toward the tram crossing and

the main road. No one looked back again to the house, and the watching figure.

They had a good day, but did not particularly enjoy it. They were all tired when they wheeled their bicycles into the garage at Long View in the evening. They went into the house together for the cocoa that Mrs. Manson always made for them after a day out. Patricia was in the big stone-flagged kitchen. She pointed to the table.

"Mummy and Daddy have gone out to the Hollands. I mixed the cocoa in the cups. The kettle's just boiled, and there's milk on the gas stove."

John said, "Thanks, Pat. You're a good girl."

Patricia said awkwardly, "What was it like? All right?"

John said, "Very nice." He looked at her. "I thought we might take another run that way tomorrow, if the weather holds."

Patricia was silent for a moment. Then she said, "Will the weather hold, do you think?"

"Frank thinks so. He thinks it's set fair."

There was another silence, broken when Patricia walked across and stood in front of Frank. She had the kettle in her hand. She said, "Shall I pour your cocoa? Frank—I'm sorry about last night. I lost my temper. I didn't mean what I said, or how I said it."

One of the things Frank had already learned from the citizens was the right way of accepting apologies. He said lightly, "That's all right, Pat. Forget it now. Thanks. I'll have half milk with it."

The little circle was knit again into its whole. Patrick said, explosively, "Come on, Pat! Sling the kettle over this way as well." Diana began talking, telling her some of the events of the day. "We found a place where the sea comes right up under a kind of cliff. You can sit on the edge, and it's a tremendous drop to the water. . . ." Frank looked to where John was standing near the gas stove. He was not saying anything, but his face showed his satisfaction and relief. It was the first time Frank had realized that strain could exist beneath that calm and assurance.

The autumn and winter brought other activities. The lake

froze over early in December and they had a couple of weeks of skating before the mild weather returned. There was no thick ice during the rest of the winter, but they found plenty to occupy themselves with. It seemed that spring was on them before they knew where they were. On a wet day in March they sat together in the big upstairs room which was the boys' bedroom and their headquarters, and watched the rain sweeping through the bare branches of the big chestnut that leaned over nearly to touch the house. Patrick pointed to a branch that was lashing to within inches of the window pane.

"Look. Buds beginning to break."

"Winter nearly over," Patricia said. "Good riddance to it."

Diana said, "It's been so short. It seems only last week we were skating. And collecting conkers not much longer before that."

"I like Holly Ash," Patricia said. "I didn't think I would at first. Even after we were able to boat on the lake, I wasn't sure. But I'm quite sure now. I'd rather be here than London."

Patrick glanced toward the window. "Even when it's raining?"

"Whenever. I don't think it's going to rain long. The sky looks clearer. Do you think it's going to stop, Frank?"

Frank considered it judiciously. "Yes, I think so."

The rain thinned to a drizzle, and at last stopped. A watery sun broke through the clouds, and the ground steamed as though it were already summer; the air was quite warm. They went out and wandered in the direction of the tram crossing. A tram sailed shakily down the hill toward them, clanging and sizzling on its way. They watched it vanish round the bend that the road and the tram lines took by Long Lane.

John said, "Well, what should we do? A bit wet for going in the wood, I should think."

Frank said, "Sally might have foaled."

Sally was one of the mares at the Prentice farm. They had a standing invitation to the stables there; Frank himself had always been welcome and the welcome had been unhesitatingly extended to the Manson children.

"There's the new tractor anyway," Patrick said. "It should have been coming yesterday."

"The Prentice farm then," John said. "We'd better go round by the road. It'll be too wet across the fields."

Long Lane was in great contrast to the busy Liverpool road from which it branched. It was narrow and not made up, a ribbon of mud and stone between walls, perhaps three feet high, constructed of layered flat stones. At no point did it run straight for more than thirty yards. The first bend, right at the beginning of the lane, was not far from being a right angle. Once round it, the Liverpool road disappeared, hidden by the unpruned privet hedges which flanked the tram lines along this stretch. The top halves of the lumbering trams were visible, but nothing else.

The Prentice farm was about half a mile along the lane. The buildings were set back in an L-shape—one arm consisting of the farmhouse and dairy and the other of the stables. Between them lay the duck pond. The citizens skirted this in making their way to the stables.

They found Old Harry himself there, rinsing his hands in the water butt which stood just outside the stable door. He glanced up as they approached. His face wore its happy expression, the pattern of wrinkles horizontal against the brown instead of vertical.

He said, "Hello, kids. You'd like to see the young foal?"

Diana said eagerly, "Oh, yes, Mr. Prentice, please!"

"It's born then?" John asked.

"Not much more than an hour ago. Not too easy, either."

They crowded into the stable. "But Sally's all right?" Diana asked. Old Harry pointed to the stall at the far end; they could see something move in the darkness.

"She's all right, all right. It's a good one too. A stallion."

Patrick asked, as they walked between the rows of horses, "Did the tractor come?" Old Harry nodded. "Is it next door? Could I see it?"

Old Harry put a hand on his shoulder. "There's time for that, lad. A tractor's a good tool, but a horse is a creature. Here she is. How art thou going then, Sally girl? There's the son and heir."

The foal was resting beside the mare, its thin spindly legs folded beneath it. It looked up at them with curious blinking

eyes. It was a chestnut; it had an extraordinarily large white star on its forehead, extending a good way down the nose.

"Look at that splash on him," Harry said. "I suppose we'll have to give him a name. Has any of you got any ideas? What shall we call him? Flash? Or Star? Or Whitey?"

"Call him Milk," Diana said. "Oh, Mr. Prentice, please let's call him Milk!"

Frank laughed. "I don't suppose anyone has ever heard of a horse called Milk. And a stallion at that."

"Then there shall have to be a first time, shalln't there?" said Old Harry. "Milk he is, and Milk he'll be. He's a gradely animal. I've got a mind to make a hunter of him; his father was three parts hunter and there's hunter blood in Sally. Will you ride him for me, when you're a grown woman, Diana? I've made up my mind to live till ninety so I'll still be here to watch you. What do you say?"

"I'd love to! Can I stroke him?"

"I don't suppose Sally will mind. Hey up. I'll lift you over."

The foal trembled a little as Diana pressed her head against his; she had her arms about his neck. She stroked the long white-splashed head.

"There, Milk," she said. "We'll ride all over the place when we're both grown up, you and I, and jump hedges and things. Oh, it will be lovely. You're going to be a great big beauty of a horse. You're a beauty now." She looked up to the faces watching her over the door of the stall. "Isn't he a beauty?"

Patrick said, "He's very nice. Could I just run along and have a look at the tractor, Mr. Prentice?"

"Aye. Come on, Diana, I'll lift you out again." Old Harry led the way back along the aisle between the horse stalls, and through the door to the Dutch barn. The tractor was here; gleaming steel and bright red paint. Patrick went over to it immediately and began examining its parts. Old Harry stood beside him.

"It's cost me a few pennies, has that thing," he remarked.

"But they're much better than horses, aren't they?" Frank said. "It will be a saving in the long run."

"I wouldn't have had it else. I doubt I'd have had it any road if it hadn't been that Jack had left for a job in the north. It's

meant taking a new hand on, to drive it, and he wants paying well. Stands to reason, I suppose. But the cost of things goes up, and the land doesn't grow any more, and what it does grow you don't get the price for. I'll tell thee one thing—don't go for a farmer when you grow up."

"When will the new man be driving it?" Patrick asked. "Today?"

"He doesn't come till Monday. You'll have to wait till then."

Patrick looked at the tractor regretfully. "I suppose so."

Mrs. Sharp put her head round the door and called to Old Harry; she had been keeping house for him, in what was vaguely recognized by the children as sin, since a year or two after his wife's death, twenty years before. She was a brown-skinned swarthy woman, and was sometimes known as the Gypsy.

Old Harry said, "What is it, then?"

"Gentlemen to see you. In a motorcar. They're out in the yard."

"Send them in here. I haven't got years to waste."

Patrick said, "You know, I think I could probably manage to drive this, if I experimented with it a bit."

"Happen so. If the new man doesn't come, I'll send up to the grammar and let them know I want you for the job." He turned to meet the two smartly dressed men who had come in from the yard. "Good morning. What can I do for you?"

The taller of the two strangers said, "You're Mr. Prentice, aren't you? We're from Amalgamated Cables. This is Mr. Savage, who is one of our surveyors, and my name is Carter. I look after the land development side of things."

Old Harry said, "I suppose you'll be something to do with the electric grid. You want to stick more of those damn' pylons on my land? I can tell you now, it will cost you a bit. They break a field up badly, whatever crop you're growing in it."

"No," Carter said. "That isn't our line of country." He looked at Old Harry warily. "I'm afraid that what I am going to ask you will seem rather an impertinence. Our firm is actually interested in the purchase of your land, and I am asking your permission to let Mr. Savage here go over it. You can rest

assured that there will be no damage to crops. Mr. Savage has handled this kind of thing before."

Old Harry turned round to look at the shorter of the two men. He surveyed him in silence for a few moments before turning back to Carter.

"Just what the hell are you talking about, Mister? You said something about the purchase of my land. What purchase?"

"Lord Widmer's agent will have told you about the sale of the freehold, I take it. All this part of his estate is going, I understand. We are interested in your farm because of its convenience to the main road. The firm may be putting a bid in, and with your permission we should like to have a look round."

Old Harry said quietly, "Yes, I know about the sale. I'm buying."

"Well, that remains to be seen. You haven't had a written confirmation of your bid?"

"Look here," Old Harry said. "I've farmed this land of Lord Widmer's for more than thirty years in my own right. My father farmed it before me for longer than that. My grandfather farmed Widmer land over beyond Huyton, and so far as I know his father did, too, and his father maybe. Written confirmation? I told Bannock to tell his lordship I was ready to buy the land, and give a fair price for it. I don't see as anything else is needed beyond that."

Carter said, "You may be right, Mr. Prentice. If you are so sure that Lord Widmer's agent will accept your offer, I don't imagine you will have any objection to our going over the land. We shan't do any damage. You will appreciate that we are simply carrying out instructions given us by the directors of our firm, who think they have a chance of buying."

"I've every objection," Old Harry said. "Good morning."

"But why? Why should you object to our surveying?"

"I'll tell you why. Just fancy a minute. Fancy one of those eastern sultans sent one of his men round to your house. 'Good morning,' he says. 'My master's interested in buying your wife for his harem—I'll go up to the bedroom and take a look at her.' 'No,' you say. 'Tell him she's not for sale.' 'Well,' he says, 'I'll run up the stairs and have a look at her, all the same. Those

were my instructions.' What do you do, Mr. Carter? Do you say: 'All right'?"

"Now, Mr. Prentice, it's not quite like that, is it?"

"No, it's not. I haven't got a wife. But if I had, I'd let you survey her a long chalk sooner than I'd let you set foot on my land. When my wife was alive I never thought she were mine; she was her own. But the land's mine. You can go now. Don't forget to tell your directors that I was nice and polite to you."

The shorter man said, "Perhaps I could point something out to you, Mr. Prentice." He had a dry tired voice. "The firm is only interested in the land if it meets certain requirements. If it should happen that it doesn't, then they will withdraw from the business. They will be basing their decision on my survey. If you let me go over the land now, I could see whether there is, in fact, anything that would influence them toward withdrawing. We should have done our job, and your mind would be set at rest."

Old Harry laughed; there was anger in it. "Right, Mister! So the man at the door says: 'If you just let me run up to the bedroom and look the old woman over, I'll be able to tell if there's aught as my master wouldn't take a fancy to—maybe she's got a mole on her backside. Then I can tell you he won't be interested in buying her, any road.' I'd be glad if you would go, gentlemen, while I'm still being polite. I don't like losing my temper; it upsets my stomach."

Carter said, "The alternative, from our point of view, would be to get a written order for viewing from Lord Widmer's agent. Is that the course you want us to adopt?"

"Get out!" Old Harry said. "That's the course I advise you to adopt, and you can adopt it quick. And there'll be a gun ready for the next man that comes here to talk about surveying my land. You can inform your directors of that."

They left, but Carter paused at the door. "I'm sorry about this, Mr. Prentice, and I think I understand your feelings. I'm sorry. Sorry now, and sorry in advance."

"Not as sorry as you will be," Old Harry said. "Go and tell your sultan what I told you."

Old Harry stared for a moment at the doorway through which they had gone. They heard the engine of the car start,

and then the sound of its departure. Old Harry said: "Blast 'em!" and then, paying no attention to the children, went out the same way himself.

Patrick, bending down beside the tractor, said, "He told them off, all right, didn't he? I thought that was good about the sultan."

John said, "I suppose they are going to put up a factory here. That's the only reason they can want the land."

"But they can't if Mr. Prentice doesn't let them," Diana said.

John tapped the side of the tractor with his knuckles. "They've got more money than he has."

Diana said, "But Mr. Prentice has always been here. Hasn't he, Frank? No one could make him move now. He said he was going to buy the land himself."

"If he's let," Frank said.

He was thinking, with admiration, of the man Carter. Calm, regretful, but wielding power.

By Michaelmas the skirmish was over. The stock and equipment had been sold and Old Harry had gone; rumor said to live somewhere toward Widnes, but it was unconfirmed. The citizens watched the farm buildings being demolished by a gang of Irish laborers. There were still a few pears in the upper branches of the tree that ran along the south wall of the farmhouse. Two of the men attacked the base of this with a cross-saw. When pears shook down, they left their sawing for a time to eat them, and threw some to other workmen and to the children. Just to the right of them, one of the ground-floor windows had been smashed by some of the men throwing stones. Each of the four panes had been broken out, leaving the bare cross of sash and uprights.

John, munching the pear he had been given, said, "Grown men, destroying things just for the sake of destroying them."

Patricia had acquired two pears. She cut the second one into four pieces with a penknife, and pointed the knife in turn round the circle, starting with herself. "Eeny-meeny-miney-mo, catch a nigger by his toe, if he hollers let him go, out goes—he." The he was Patrick who was immediately on her right; she handed out quarters of pear to the other three and kept one for herself.

"Cheating," Patrick observed dispassionately.

"What do you mean—cheating? I counted fairly."

"Four counts to the first three lines and three to the last one. Fifteen altogether. If you start with yourself, it's bound to be me."

Patricia paused with the quarter of pear still in her hand. "Here you are. Take it. We always used to count like that, but if you think it's cheating, you have it."

Patrick laughed. "I don't want any. I only thought it funny—at one time you used to do it so that Frank was out always. Just lately it's been Di or me."

She flushed angrily now. "You beast! Just because your mind works like . . ." Patrick was still smiling, and she threw herself at him in fury. He gave way at first, but eventually pinned her down. He tweaked the end of her nose fairly gently.

John said, "There goes another window."

One of the laborers had bitten into his pear but apparently not found it to his taste; he had pitched it through the window of the dairy. The big butter churn had stood under that window, and Mrs. Sharp had passed mugs of buttermilk to them as they stood outside, taking care not to tread on the wallflowers.

Patrick leaned his head close against his twin's. "Pax? Pax, Pat?"

She heaved upward in answer.

Frank said, "I suppose it's all got to come down, anyway. It doesn't really matter whether the glass is broken now or later. They use the bricks again but the glass isn't worth saving."

Now Patrick began to twist her wrist. She bore it with set lips for a little while, but was forced to cry out at last, "Paddy, I hate you! Let me go."

"Not unless it's pax."

"Pax, then."

"Pax all day? No counterattacks when I'm not looking?"

"All day. You swine."

John said, "You can always use glass. Anyone can. All this is sickening. Let's go up to the lake."

The factory opened the following spring. It was small enough in comparison with what was to come later, and there were

some who welcomed it. Mr. Heddon did. Frank was away from school with a heavy cold; the worst was over and he was lying on the sofa. Since it was Thursday, the smell of coffee and pastry filled the little room. Outside the rain blustered in gusts across the narrow strip of lawn between the cottages and the wall of Pinnick House. Mr. Heddon came in shaking drops off his raincoat.

Mrs. Bates said, "You can shake that in the porch. And see that you've wiped your feet properly. I've never known a man like you for having the wet stick to him."

"Water's like money," Mr. Heddon said. "There's some it rolls off and some it sticks to. I'd as soon be wet and wealthy as dry in the workhouse. I brought you some black pudding today, Mother. It's the real stuff; from a blue-blooded pig."

"I'd be happier if money stuck to me a bit closer."

"Now you could be worse off. Only one boy. And how is it you're not at school, Frank? You could be like Mrs. Awinstall; she tells me she's expecting again, and that'll be nine of them."

Frank said, "I've had a bad cold, Mr. Heddon."

Mrs. Bates said briefly, "We lost two, as you know. It's never seemed like luck to me."

Mr. Heddon nodded. "Eh, and the boy was a good one, all right. I've never known a lad sharper. I used to think he was a bit too old-fashioned, but it was a shock all the same. Still, you've got Frank here, and there's no denying he's clever enough."

"No," Mrs. Bates said. "There's no denying that."

"Happen he'll go into the new factory when he leaves the grammar. It's going to be a lot bigger, I hear. There's going to be an office built next. It would be a handy job for him, being just down the road."

Mrs. Bates said, "He can find a job in Prescot. It's only a penny on the tram."

"Nay, why go up into Prescot when there's a good job waiting on the doorstep? He could come back home for his dinner."

"And am I supposed to be pleased about that? He's never had his dinners at home since he first started school. It's bad enough having the factory down the road, without having Frank working there."

"Now, Mother, what have you got against the factory? There's jobs for folks there. Mrs. Awnstall's glad enough that her husband got taken on. So will others be too. There's plenty of mills closing down still, and I did hear Beecham's might be feeling the pinch—I'm told they're only worth nineteen-and-six a box now. It's the tragedy of life that you've got to work to get money, but it's a bigger tragedy still when you can't get the work."

"That may be true enough. But I hear tell they're putting up new houses on the other side of the Lane—for the workers. Any kind of dregs out of Liverpool; that's what we shall have round here. The kids'll be into the gardens, pinching fruit and stuff. And do you think the gentry will stay in these parts when that sort of thing happens? Mr. Smith—he's the new butler at the House—was saying only yesterday that he didn't see how the Pinnicks would stay. And then there's the Strellings, and the Astons. They'll all go."

"I suppose they will," Mr. Heddon said. "But I'm a practical man, Mother. If they're going, they're going, and there's nought we can do about it. And from my own point of view, it's no loss. I've never got farther than the lodge with any of the big houses, as far as custom went, and there's more chance with folks who'll be working at the A.C."

"Dregs. From Bootle, as like as not."

"Nay. I only know two kinds of folk. Those as pay, and those as don't; and the first lot's saved and the second lot's damned. I've got a good eye for the damned. When they clear my things up, they won't find many bad debts in Sam Heddon's books."

"What about blasphemy? Isn't that a bad debt?"

"Nay then, thou hast never heard me blaspheme. 'Money, oh Money, thy praises I sing!'"

"You're a sinner, Sam Heddon, and if there was a godly man came round, I wouldn't buy from you."

"Eh, Mother, we can't all spend our days on our knees. Just think of it. If we all went to church as often as you do, how would the parsons manage? They'd never have room."

"I don't say that I'm much of a churchgoer, so you needn't turn your wicked tongue on me. But there's such a thing as being decent, and respecting things that are decent."

Mr. Heddon gathered up his basket. "I met a parson once—and he's the only one I've met that I've had any time for—and he said to me: 'When religion's decent, it's not religion. Because decency,' he said, 'belongs to the world, and religion has no truck with the World, the Flesh, and the Devil.' " He looked toward Frank on the sofa. "You're a young one, and you can take advice. Do it, and damn it, whatever it is. If you're a parson, stick to your prayers, and if you're a sinner, stick to your sins. Always remember what the poet said."

He put his basket down again, while he struck a rhetorical pose:

"Tender-handed stroke a nettle,
And it stings you for your pains;
Grasp it like a man of mettle,
And it soft as silk remains!"

Keep that in mind, lad, and you won't go far wrong. Now, Mother, since I'm such an ungodly man, I think I'd better be getting on with my rounds this morning."

Mrs. Bates laughed. "Sit down, you old fool. You haven't had your coffee yet."

The factory, once established, expanded steadily. The factory itself spread over the fields to the east of Long Lane, straightened now and properly made up, while the houses for the workers ran in straight lines to the west. It was not long before they reached almost to Huyton Lane. With the houses came shops. The western half of Holly Ash had become a suburb of Liverpool.

The thing that resigned Dr. Manson to the new Holly Ash was the striking up of a friendship with the A.C. general manager. Dr. Manson's hobby was chess, and since leaving London he had been forced to fall back on correspondence games for the taste, so precious to him, of real opposition. The boys had all learned to play, and Patrick and Frank were quite good for their age, but they were not in Dr. Manson's class. William Lucus was; he came to Holly Ash when the experimental stage was over and the development stage had begun, and it was not long before he had introduced himself to the Mansons. He was a

bachelor, living alone in a new, highly polished, uncomfortable house on the other side of the Liverpool road, and he became a frequent visitor at Long View.

He was a man of deceptive mildness, a mildness so pronounced in his overt behavior as to be easily mistaken, by different observers, for indifference or servility. He was small and rather round-bellied, and had a toothbrush mustache. His eyes were alert, but so set under heavy brows as to give an impression of sleepiness. His hands were his pride, but a quiet pride, displayed discreetly rather than uttered. They were heavily callused and speckled with flecks of gold, the tiny particles of copper from the wire whose drawing was the factory's chief concern. He was a friendly man but a discriminating one. From the beginning he took to Patrick of all the children. Patrick had a knack of attracting the attention of men whose interests were technical or mechanical; his own eagerness and ability were so marked.

It was not long before Patrick had a permanent invitation into the factory, and Frank naturally accompanied him. They nodded to the gateman and went through the high steel gates, walking on smooth concrete where once, at this time of year, the mud had piled in fantastic crests and furrows.

Mr. Lucus's office was not a part of the main office block but a small makeshift hut at an intersection of the roads that carried the heavy lorries through the factory grounds. From halfway up it was glassed on three sides, and the top of the door in the fourth side was clear glass. The office itself was a litter of odds and ends—batteries, strips of wire, a hardness tester—but the desk was neat and orderly.

Mr. Lucus said, "Shall we have tea up?" Patrick nodded. Mr. Lucus picked up the telephone. "Lucy? Tea and biscuits for three, will you? Well sugared."

He put the telephone down again. "I shan't be here much longer."

Patrick said anxiously, "At Holly Ash?"

"No, no. I meant my little Crystal Palace here. We've had an inspection from London; I'm to move into the office block as soon as they've installed me some gold-plated inkwells."

"Why not?" Patrick said. "If I were you I should have the biggest office I could, with an armchair."

"You're more sure of yourself than I am, Paddy. What about you, Frank? A kitchen chair in a hut, or an armchair in an office?"

Frank said, "I don't think it matters."

"I don't suppose it does. Aha, the tea. I shall be farther from the canteen in my new abode. Thank you, Lucy."

Patrick said, "Is there any possibility of your being moved from Holly Ash, Bill? I mean, at any time. Not just now."

"Anything's possible. But it's unlikely. Are you coming in to work with me when you leave school?"

"Serious, Bill?"

"It's not a bad firm. It carries a lot of dead weight, so it's not hard to shine in A.C. Look at me."

"Frank and I are trying for scholarships to the university. I want to take mechanical engineering. Do you think there might be an opening after I've taken my degree?"

"Let me see. You're fifteen now. You'll be leaving the university when—1940?"

"Forty or 'forty-one."

"It's looking ahead a bit, but I think we might fit you in." He smiled in Frank's direction. "Will your Jonathan be coming with you?"

Patrick shook his head. "I doubt it. Frank's thinking of taking an arts degree. He wants to be a whole and cultured citizen of this great country."

He ducked as Frank cuffed at him amiably. The last sentence was a paraphrase of the headmaster's continual exhortation to the boys to opt for the Classics side; he was himself the senior Classics master.

"Of course," Mr. Lucus said. "What did you think of going in for when you leave the university, Frank?"

"I don't know yet. If I go to the university my mother wants me to be a schoolmaster."

Mr. Lucus nodded his head, gently, judiciously, approvingly. "Yes. I think you would make a good schoolmaster."

Patrick said facetiously, "Take a thousand lines, that boy at the back! No, make it ten thousand!"

Frank smiled. He knew what was behind Mr. Lucus's relapse into politeness—disinterest, if not contempt. In that view of things, Patrick was important, he was not; it was a clarification of the man's obviously keener interest in Patrick and a looking forward to the time when Patrick would have divested himself of his unnecessary friend. With Patrick he would have argued, as Frank had listened to him arguing often enough. The two of them formed a bond, and he stood outside it.

Mr. Lucus said, "Well, Paddy, do you think your maths are up to working out the difference in tension on a seven-die machine against a five-die one, other variables as constants?"

To be a schoolmaster was to be something that could be despised by people like Lucus. He had not realized it before, but the realization now was known and ticketed with other things. He was not going to be a schoolmaster; he was sure of that.

Patrick said, "I can't imagine they ever would be."

"They will be," said Mr. Lucus. "You'll be coming in here in a few years and changing all my setups with a few penciled calculations. Not here, perhaps, but in whatever palatial surrounding they've put me into by then. When Frank is telling old Penrose how to run the grammar school."

They discussed their futures together on a warm clear evening in the following spring. It was John's seventeenth birthday. The weather had been exceptionally mild for several days and they had had the birthday tea in the garden, a common occurrence with the birthdays of the twins and Diana but never before possible in John's case. He had been entered, the previous day, for an Oxford scholarship; the long shadows from the apple trees, set at each corner of the lawn, were shadows of the end of youth. Mrs. Manson had presided at the tea table and still sat with them. Dr. Manson had gone in to get ready for surgery.

Mrs. Manson said, "The chickens getting their flying feathers, preparing to soar away. It won't be long before I'm left in an empty nest. I feel quite the old hen."

Patrick said, "I've never known anyone like you, Mummy, for self-dramatization. Even when John embarks on his study of Immoral Sciences you will still have four of us left."

"But for how long?" asked Mrs. Manson. "This is me in my

well-known role of Sarah Bernhardt. Throw me a cigarette, John."

"For a good few years yet, since Frank and I will be going to the Northwestern, if we get in anywhere. Not to mention the girls. Unless they want to have a shot at the Immoral Tripod, too."

"Since Daddy can get me into a Liverpool hospital, I shall still be here," Diana said. She had never wavered from an early determination to become a nurse. "Until I get my S.R.N., anyway."

John said, "And then it's Di for the high seas—nursing lepers on Devil Island."

"I've been thinking about Ceylon," Diana said. At fourteen she was more poised and physically more attractive than her older sister. Her smallness was that of a petite woman; Patricia with her longer limbs was still gawky. "There's something fascinating about Ceylon. I don't know what it is."

"Perhaps the tea," John suggested. "Has Cyprus gone to join Borneo and Madagascar and the rest in limbo?"

"I don't really mind where," Diana said dreamily.

"What about you, Pat?" Mrs. Manson asked.

Patricia said: "I think perhaps I'll be a famous man's mistress. A great painter, or a cabinet minister."

Patrick shook his head. "What an ambition. Famous men can pick and choose. I really think you'd better stay at home."

Mrs. Manson tapped her cigarette ash onto the lawn. "Good for the grass blades. Why a mistress, though? There's a good deal more security and future in being a wife, and the preliminaries don't require very much more skill."

"I've no intention of being a wife ever." She glanced at Frank, and then quickly to Patrick and John. "Having been brought up in close contact with such wonderful specimens as these three, I can't believe that any woman would marry if she knew what she was doing. I shall know what I'm doing. I shall have a brilliant career, doing something or other, and be a mistress in my spare time."

Mrs. Manson said dryly, "While admittedly lacking in personal experience, I should guess that being a mistress on the

scale you have in mind would be even more difficult to combine with a brilliant career than being a wife would."

"I shall be a mistress," Patricia said, "on my terms."

"Whichever you are," Mrs. Manson said, "it looks as though I was right about the emptying nest. Even if you can't all fly yet, you seem to have your eyes cocked for the weather."

Patrick said dramatically, "We shall never desert you, Mrs. Micawber. Frank in his schoolmastering and me in my wire-drawing—we'll stay close to home and press your withered hand on cold winter evenings. We shall be a comfort in your declining years."

"My years have been declining for some while now, and you've been a pest the whole time." She glanced at Frank. "Will you really be a schoolmaster? I find it difficult to imagine somehow."

"I think I should manage fairly well." He stared, smiling, at Mrs. Manson; he recognized in her an acuteness above that of the citizens and was the more determined to hold to his secrets. "As good a schoolmaster as Pat would be a mistress, at any rate."

John and Patrick laughed. Patrick said, "One in the eye for you, Pat!"

Mrs. Manson smiled. "It wasn't the ability I was questioning. In any case, even if he is a schoolmaster he probably won't stay in these parts. And Patrick may very well find more profitable spots to draw wire in. No, I shall be a desolate old woman, with my brood scattered to the four corners of the globe. It's fate."

"We shall offer no further opposition," John said gravely. "You are going to be lonely and wretched and die in the workhouse. We all wish you the very best of luck."

"You can drink the champagne I send you," Patricia said, "though you never can forgive."

"I have the solution," Patrick said. "It's up to John and me, since Pat and Di have ruled themselves out. We shall have to marry at a frantically early age and present you with hordes of grandchildren to rear. Half a dozen each, say. How does that strike you?"

Mrs. Manson stretched a hand across to John. "I think I'll

have another cigarette. And I think, if you don't mind, I'll take the workhouse."

The Manor was sold in summer. When they heard about it, John sent up the keys of the boathouse and the pavilion, with a note of explanation and of thanks. He had a letter back from Mrs. Strelling almost at once.

DEAR MR. JOHN MANSON:

Your thoughtfulness in sending the keys back to me, and the kindness of your good wishes, remind me of an old intention. I had meant to ask you to tea shortly after our meeting, which is a happy memory of mine. I let the matter slip, and in the end it became one of those things which should have been done but are too late to do now. My life seems littered with them. But at least you have given me the opportunity to redress in this case. I hope you will all give me the pleasure of having you to tea here on Sunday next. I shall be expecting you about half-past three, if I have no word from you to the contrary.

Yours very truly,
ELAINE STRELLING

John wrote back to accept the invitation. Mrs. Bates, when Frank told her of it, was very doubtful. She had come to accept the Mansons as a natural part of her son's life, and apart from an occasional sarcasm had raised no objection to the fact that in general he spent more time at Long View than he did at home. But the Manor was a different proposition; different, as she saw it, in kind rather than in degree. She would have been readier to accept social contact with the Pinnicks, even though she still did odd cleaning jobs there. For rough-and-ready accountancy, the Pinnicks and the Astons were included among the local gentry, but in fact the Strellings were the only family near Holly Ash who met what in her mind were the true standards. She had been in service as a girl with a family whose distinction was entirely in pedigree, and she could not now accept any other criterion. In a sense she despised the Pinnicks; they affected to show themselves the equals of those she knew to be their betters.

She said, "You say that John's written back accepting?"

"Of course," Frank said. "It would have been very impolite if he hadn't done so."

She was replenishing the food in Esther's cage. Esther was failing now, and occasionally extended her naturally wicked temper even to Mrs. Bates. She thrust her neck through the gap where the food tray had been taken away, and shrieked savagely.

Mrs. Bates said, "Perhaps so. But I don't like it, all the same. I'm surprised at Mrs. Strelling. I believe they used to have the local children up at the Manor at one time—at Christmas, and for a party in summer. But that's a lot different from asking people to tea. I don't think it's a good thing at all."

Frank said, "If Mrs. Strelling doesn't know how to behave, it isn't up to us to tell her, is it?"

Esther snapped at her as she brought the tray back. "Get in, you hussy!" Mrs. Bates cried. "Get back before I fetch you one." Esther retreated, and she pushed the tray home and slipped the bar through the rings to hold it. "You show too ready a tongue sometimes, son. No one's said anything about telling Mrs. Strelling how to behave. Anyway, I don't see as how you need to be concerned in this. If she didn't mention you by name, then you're not asked."

"She said 'all of you' in the letter."

"She meant the other Mansons. If she wrote to the eldest boy and said all of you she couldn't have meant anything else. I'm not going to have it said that my son pushed in where he wasn't asked."

He had used indifference against his mother for so long that he could adopt it with both ease and skill. He went to the side-board and switched the radio on.

"Just as you like. You know how she met us. She met us all together and now she has invited us all together and John has accepted. If you think I ought not to go, then I shan't. It won't worry me if I offend her, and she'll be leaving the district soon anyway."

The radio transmission came up. A band was playing some popular tune with a simple strong rhythm that he could enjoy; he was very insensitive to tone. He hummed the melody, out of key.

Mrs. Bates said, "Just what did she say in her letter—about inviting all of you?"

"I can't remember. Something about remembering when she met us all at the lake and hoping we would come to tea with her."

He hummed another half dozen bars before she spoke again. "In that case you'd better go. But let them do the talking."

"I generally do," he said.

Mrs. Strelling received them in the drawing room. They had not seen her since the time at the lake, and although there had been reports of her being ill, they had not been serious enough to prepare them for the change. Her face was very white, the cheeks sunken and the brow's arch gaunt above eyes whose clearness was the clearness of pain. Her hair was quite white now, and drawn back tightly into a bun. She got up from a bureau where she had been writing, and greeted them.

"You're John, I know. I should never forget your face. Introduce me to the others again."

There had been some argument among the citizens as to how they should address her. They had not come to any common agreement.

John said, "These are my sisters, ma'am. Patricia and Diana."

"Now I remember," Mrs. Strelling said. "Patricia had the rudder. Isn't that right?"

Patricia said, "Yes, Mrs. Strelling."

"My brother, Patrick," John said. "Pat's twin. And this is Frank Bates."

"I'd almost forgotten that item. But I remember seeing you peeping out of the window. You will be the Frank Bates from Ash Cottages?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"There was a time when I knew everyone in Holly Ash. Fortunately I gave up that small achievement before Holly Ash itself made it impossible by growing so fast. It's funny—my husband fought the proposal to bring the tram lines through Holly Ash so bitterly; it was a battle and everyone for miles around joined in. And they lost and the trams came, but nothing happened. Nothing apart from the trams, that is, and

one gets used to the noise. The factory started without any fuss at all, without anyone noticing what was happening, and look at the change it has brought."

"We are sorry to know you are leaving, ma'am," John said.

"It was thoughtful of you to send back the keys. One acts selfishly in so many ways, I'm afraid. You enjoyed using the lake, did you not?

John nodded. "Very much."

"That part of the estate is being sold to the Cables people. You didn't know that? You see, it comes in the end to people like me selling out to those we called our enemies. The trams now—the local people did not object to them. They were pleased to be able to get into Liverpool and Prescot so easily. No, it was we who agitated about it, and now . . . I suppose they will have the lake filled in. They could hardly do anything else with it, could they?"

Patrick said, "They have to find somewhere to build, Mrs. Strelling. Factories have to be built, and the land has to be got from somewhere."

It was since his growing friendship with Mr. Lucas that Patrick had shown signs of an unusual earnestness on points of public interest. He spoke now patiently, eager to explain.

"Yes, Patrick," Mrs. Strelling said. "You are quite right. I indulge myself in almost everything, including a guilty conscience. In any case, I should have had to leave very soon. My illness will not allow me to stay here. I was sorry about the lake when I got John's letter, but you are young and I don't suppose you take these things so seriously. I think we could have tea now, don't you? I'm afraid we can't have it outside; I've become a dreadful hothouse plant these last few years." She pulled the trailing sash beside her chair. "Tell me, Patrick. If factories have to be built, what has to be done with crumbling edifices like me? Do you have any views on that?"

Patrick, in embarrassment, said nothing. John said, "Paddy has become great friends with Mr. Lucas, the A.C. manager here."

"You must not excuse him," Mrs. Strelling said. "I like to meet a serious young man. The young men of my time were not

serious enough, I'm afraid. Except as fighters, and as one grows old one sees how good a thing courage is, but how luckless."

John smiled. "Then you don't recommend courage, ma'am?"

"Not if a man is looking only for success. Then courage may help him, but it will more likely be his undoing. For success, I would advise single-mindedness. But courage is worth having, I think. Because few people can have success, and courage is a great comfort in failure. Thank you, Bessie. Would you bring the cherry cake in? And would you take this letter for the post?"

The tea had been brought in on a large clumsy trolley. Bessie was one of Frank's old playmates from the time of playing house in the ruins beside the tram lines; she was a year or two older than he. She had darted him one quick look as she came into the room—a look in which he read surprise, but not envy; rather the reverse. It crossed his mind with regret that it would have been excellent some day to own this house, to be able to see envy on such faces as that, and that that ambition, at least, could never be achieved. The world changed, he perceived, too fast for ambitions to be tied to the particular. That left only ambition for its own sake, savored quietly and alone.

"Miss Patricia," Mrs. Strelling said, "would you be kind enough to serve tea? I'm sure John will help you with the plates."

Patricia was taken by surprise, but she acquitted herself well. John performed his own duties with grave elegance, while Mrs. Strelling looked on approvingly. Diana was the only one of the party who still showed signs of uneasiness; Patrick's embarrassment had been only temporary.

Mrs. Strelling said, "The things one doesn't do always seem to have much worse effects than those one does. I have had a very lonely life here. And yet I could have had the pleasure of your companies, for I'm sure you would always have been too polite to refuse to come if I had asked you. And now there is only time for all the business of getting ready to go. You must tell me some things about yourselves. Diana, you are the youngest. Do they bully you?"

Diana shook her head. "No, ma'am."

"I was one of a large family, and all boys but me. They

bullied me dreadfully. We lived in a very rambling house in Lincolnshire, and I was continually finding new hiding places and continually being flushed—as they called it—out of them. It was very much like a fox hunt, I suppose, in many ways. I cried away many afternoons in fear and anxiety, and I thought that I only had to grow up to be free of both.

“They were all killed young, my brothers. Two in the Boer War, and two in the German War. And Harry was killed in a fall, during a real fox hunt, and Dick disappeared somewhere in South America. I cried for them all, and as I cried I remembered how they had hunted me, and I cried all the more. They were cruel sometimes, but they were very brave. You are lucky, Diana. Your brothers are not cruel to you, and they are going to be brave men, too, and there will be no wars, and no hunting fields, and no South America. It’s strange, you know. I think about them more and more. And as I grow older I remember less of the cruelties and more of the nice things about them.”

She had been speaking directly to Diana, to draw her out; but Diana’s face had been showing increasing signs of misery to the point now where she seemed to be not far from tears. Mrs. Strelling paused.

“Why, child,” she asked, “what is it? Have I upset you?” Diana’s voice was unsteady. “That they should all be killed . . .”

“I am silly,” Mrs. Strelling said. “I should not tell sad tales. But it all happened a long time ago, you know. And it is all over now. Once it has happened, it can’t happen again.”

4

Cartwright collected him punctually at Lime Street and took him back in his Renown to Holly Ash. The house that Mr. Lucas had lived in was occupied by an assistant manager and his family; the Cartwrights lived in a house, new to Bates, on

Strellings' land. It was, in fact, shielded altogether from both the factory and its attendant housing estates by a copse, which was all that now remained of the Strellings' wood. It was a solid comfortable house with an air of having been there a long time and well supplied with brick pillars, at present festooned with climbing roses.

Bates waited outside the garage for Cartwright. He indicated, when Cartwright came out, the copse that ran right up to the end of the garden.

"Do you have much trouble with children coming through from that direction? I see you have a nice little orchard."

Cartwright looked at the wood with a pride of ownership.

"Trouble? No, no. It's factory ground, you know. I believe there used to be a certain amount of trespassing at one time, but the war stopped all that. Sabotage to pick a leaf of holly. The effect has lasted. It's beautifully quiet here. Too quiet for me in some ways, but Milly's always wanted quietness."

Bates said, "I wonder where the children play now?"

Cartwright led the way into the house. "At the sports ground mostly, I should think. There always seem to be hundreds of them there anyway. And I don't think all of them have parents in A.C. by a long way. There'll probably be a reckoning on that score eventually, but it's Ickles's worry, not mine. They're talking about a municipal sports ground, but God knows where they'll get the land from."

"How many factories are there in Holly Ash now?"

"Five, if you count a ramshackle affair that makes some kind of boiled sweets. Milly! We're here."

Milly came down the stairs, bulking even larger than was reasonable against the sunset light from a window behind her. She greeted Bates in a friendly but shy fashion. He wondered what Helen had found common in her; her clothes probably—she might have deliberately dressed to accentuate her massive fatness, and the colors were all wrong.

The two Cartwrights did not make a good, or even pleasant, pair. She seemed to have a bad effect on him. He talked more, and more loudly, and laughed a lot. The talk was not directed against her in any way, but as he talked she grew shyer. Bates felt contempt, not unmixed with annoyance, for a man who

could have lived with a woman as long as Cartwright had and yet, with the best intention, be unable to do anything about what was clearly of great concern to him—the mastering of her shyness.

She made them a good dinner, but it was punctuated by jokes of Cartwright's that were progressively feebler and progressively more hilarious to Cartwright himself. Bates hoped, for her sake, that Mrs. Cartwright would abandon the two men to their own devices with coffee, but she stayed with them, probably on Cartwright's insistence. The atmosphere did not improve in any way.

He said at last, "Would you think it terribly rude of me if I went for a stroll? I was born near here, you know. I should like to look around and see what's become of some of my old haunts. I don't suppose there will be any time tomorrow."

Cartwright said, "Not at all, old man. You pop out by all means. You'll find things changed, mark you. Never mind, if you feel in a sentimental mood when you come back, there's plenty of whisky in the house. I don't think there's anything like whisky when you're sentimental. Though Milly's a bit of a gin toper, eh, old girl? I'll be in my study; I've got some of the latest trouble from your place to sort out. Just put your head round the door."

It was dusk outside; a clear night with stars beginning to appear. Cartwright had driven back through Huyton, and come in from the Huyton road. Bates walked in the opposite direction. Going home, he thought. After a long evening—climbing trees, rabbiting, boating on the lake—to be going home . . . and yet the trees were gone, and there was no dim wall in the distance, and he might listen in vain for the familiar sound of the west-bound tram, singing and clanging its way toward the distant vastness of Liverpool. He trod a pavement, and the copse on his left was so thin that he could see the lights of the factory through it.

There were a few other houses of much the same type as Cartwright's. It was a very respectable and quiet road. It turned into the Liverpool road at a point that, he had calculated, would be opposite the site of Ash Cottages. When he reached the intersection, he stood looking across to the other side, be-

lieving at first that he must have forgotten the lie of the land. Where his home had stood was raised the proud façade of Woolworth's.

All that side of the road was a shopping arcade; it extended higher up toward the Knowsley Lane and down as far as he could see. Pinnick House had gone; at least, he presumed it did not still stand, isolated, behind the glass and chromium and polished black granite that faced him. His first guess had been right—Ash Cottages had stood there, directly opposite. The old milestone and mounting block had been left; it had stood outside the gardener's cottage and now formed a kind of link between Woolworth's and a chain-store grocery shop. Its picturesqueness had saved it for this unlovely marriage.

He crossed the road automatically, but as automatically headed down the hill, away from the spot where Ash Cottages had stood. The pavement was still wide, but it was concrete flagged in place of the stony soil that had stretched between the curbstone and the high wall of Pinnick House. There were not many people about—a young girl walking briskly, a middle-aged couple, a boy of about seven staring into the window of a toy shop. High curving concrete lamp standards threw their electric violet against the softer, bluer night sky.

Bates paused. As though he had been walking with his eyes closed, judging distance by his strides, he knew where he was. Here, on his right, the gate to the House, the Lodge, and Sandy anxiously waiting for the arrival of the car. And directly opposite, on the other side of the road, the ruins in which they had played house. He looked at a shoe shop, exclaiming SUMMER SALE in red letters, and from there across the road. Nothing but the road, and the ragged flow of traffic, and the fenced-in boundaries of the copse.

A voice said, "Hello, Mr. Bates."

He realized that he had noticed the approach, without paying any attention to it: a uniformed policeman walking solidly up the hill, glancing into windows, occasionally trying the door of a shop. He looked more closely. Despite the uniform, the recognition was not difficult.

"Sid!" he said. "I never knew you'd gone into the Force."

Sid nodded, grinning. "Went in after my demob."

"Well, I'm damned!" He looked at him closely. "I should never have thought you would be big enough."

"Just made it. I think the R.E.s put the extra half an inch on. I was three years digging tunnels through Gib. I hear you've been doing well—running the Cables now?"

"Senior office boy, you might call it."

"Good luck to you. Back on a visit? Oh, the Gala, I suppose. Come down to present the prizes?"

"Yes." He was tantalized by the thought that here beside him was someone who shared his own memories, who could close his eyes and see the gates of the House, the trams swaying beneath leafy branches along their grassy tracks. "This place has changed, Sid. From our time."

Sid hunched his shoulders back and pulled down the bottom of his tunic. He glanced along the street of shops; there was no one near them.

"It has that," Sid said. "They're a right lot that live here now. By God! Some of them would cut their mothers' throats for twopence. Up from Bootle, half of them, and the rest from Scotland Road. You'd wonder where they were brought up. Coal in the bloody bath! I reckon some of them have a litter of pigs up there."

Bates was amused. "Do they give you much trouble?"

"They would if they had the guts. Best part of them never went in the Army, you know. Work of national importance, that was what they were on. Eight quid a week, plus overtime. And then they had the bloody nerve to kick up when I was given a council house. War service didn't count, being in the Force didn't count—all that counted was that the wife and I didn't have half a dozen dirty-faced kids hanging round us. Do you know—one Labour councilor wanted to get us turned out?"

Bates said, "I suppose they will be pretty solidly Labour round here."

"I tell you—as far as they're concerned, Attlee carries a flashlight under his shirt tails. That's apart from the ones who worship Nye Bevan. They're all waiting till Labour gets back again; then they'll knock each other's teeth out and queue up for free dentures."

Bates laughed. "Nothing we can do about it. Times have changed."

"They have, by God! When I think of what it used to be like . . . Do you know—they've got four different clubs—working men's clubs, they call them—between here and Long Lane. After they've done damn all at your place all day, they spend the evening drinking cut-price beer, and telling each other how good it's going to be when Clem's back in Downing Street. I patrol past them night after night, and it's as much as I can do to stop myself from spewing sometimes. I tell you, they turn my stomach."

"I can imagine that it's not too pleasant for you. Why don't you ask for a transfer?"

"Nay!" Sid said. "Why should I go? I was born here in Holly Ash. And my mother's still alive, you know—she's living with Peggy and me now."

He smiled, a broad sly smile under his policeman's helmet. "There was one night I enjoyed myself—the night after the last election. Eh, they were quiet that night! I walked up and down, passing one club after another, and there was hardly a sound from any of them. Each time I went past one, I said to myself: 'Good old Winston!' And when it was turning-out time, they went like undertakers. They couldn't really believe it had happened."

Sid paused, and looked up and down the road with a curious combination of furtiveness and the law's solemnity. He leaned toward Bates.

"I'll tell you something, Frank, and I've never told a soul else. About midnight I came up to the Constitutional—that's the biggest of the lot. There wasn't anyone about, and do you know what I did? I went up to the door and . . ."

He put his mouth up toward Bates's ear, relating his exploit. Then he stood away again. His laughter interfered with speech.

"Right up against the front door! And as I did, I was saying out loud, 'There you are, chaps—there's a toast to you!'" He shook his head. "I was bloody silly, mind. If someone had come along, it would have been out of the Force with Sidney. But I'd never felt so pleased with myself for years, I tell you."

Bates had been laughing in sympathy; the picture conjured

up was funny enough. He said now, "Good for you, Sid. Still, I don't know how you stand it."

"I despise them—that's how I stand it. Despise them for the silly ignorant blighters they are."

Bates looked about him; at the concrete flags, the towering street lights, the gleaming window glass. "If it were only the people it would be bad enough, but the place itself has changed so much, hasn't it?"

Sid's gaze followed his own. "Changed? Eh, I suppose it has. Do you know—I've forgotten where places used to be. You lived up the road a bit, didn't you?" Bates nodded. "Yes, I reckon the place has changed, but you don't notice it when you've been here nearly all the time."

The two men looked up the hill, toward Woolworth's and the bus stop.

"The place is all right," Sid said. "It's the bloody folks who live here that's the trouble."

four

Patricia, leaning far out of the window, said, "I suppose this is the way you climb in when you come back after lights-out?"

Patrick looked over her shoulder. A drain pipe ran down beside the window, straight for a couple of yards and then diagonally branching to the right. Five yards farther on, it joined another vertical pipe running down to the ground, six stories below.

Diana said, "Oh, no! How could they?"

"You have a keen eye," Patrick said judiciously. "I hadn't spotted that myself. Need some training, but I think it should be a possible. Come and have a look at this, Frank. What do you think of that as an alternative homeward route?"

Mrs. Manson and Frank went over to join the others at the window. Frank said, "I don't think anything of it."

After a casual downward glance, Mrs. Manson said, "I agree. Frank, I think I shall have to appoint you Paddy's guardian. He isn't fit to be let loose on his own."

Patricia said, "I wouldn't mind trying it. It's only this last stretch that's really tricky; the early part should be easy."

Mrs. Manson turned away from the window. "I don't propose to make myself giddy looking down there." With her back to the others, she surveyed the small room approvingly. "It's really not at all bad. How far are you from the bathroom?"

"Two or three doors," Frank said.

Patricia sat down on Patrick's bed. She said wistfully, "I do envy you. Getting away on your own . . . no ties."

"You're letting your imagination run away with you," Patrick said. "You might say that of John, larking around Oxford, but these are the hard-working provinces."

"John's different," she said. "Why should you get away? You're only my twin. There's no justice for women."

"You wanted to train to be a secretary," Mrs. Manson pointed out. "If you'd gone to university first that would have set back the appointed day when you marry your boss, by three years."

"I'm not going to marry him," Patricia said. "I suppose you're right. I should like to have the satisfaction of starting to earn money before Paddy does, too."

"Far be it from me to discourage any of you from that," Mrs. Manson said. "Thank you, Di. It's hardly credible that within a decade or so you should all of you be supporting yourselves. God knows what your father and I will do with the money. I doubt if we shall know."

She had been feeling in her bag for her cigarette case; Patrick produced a packet and offered her one. "I suppose you could take up cigars. Frank?"

Patricia stretched her hand out also. "Thanks." Patrick put the packet away. "I don't approve of young ladies smoking."

Mrs. Manson said, "I only became a heavy smoker owing to the strain on my nerves of having to bring the four of you up." She blew out a curl of smoke. "I'm only surprised I didn't take to smoking opium."

Patrick said, "Taking false credit for an enforced virtue. I don't suppose anyone offered you any opium."

"And do you," Patricia said, "recommend wife- and motherhood to me as a profession, after all that?"

"Most decidedly. You can't imagine how it makes you look forward to old age. I don't think there can be such a delightful feeling of anticipation in any other walk of life. Are you sure there isn't anything else either of you want, while the shops are still open?"

Frank said, "Thank you, Aunt Julia. I think we're well enough stocked."

Mrs. Manson said, "You're the sensible member of the partnership, Frank. I rely on you to let me know if anything is required."

Patricia said, "Uncle Frank will look after you, Paddy. Don't worry about anything while you've got Uncle Frank."

Frank had only a moderate taste for beer, but he could drink more than Patrick without any noticeable effects. Quite often he helped Patrick in getting back to the hostel late at night; it was not so much a matter of lending physical assistance as of keeping him relatively quiet and persuading him against certain flamboyancies of behavior. The drain pipe that Patricia had originally pointed out had a great temptation for him. Several times he had to be coaxed out of a determination to scale it, before, at last, the scaling became a necessity.

The lights in the students' hostel were put out at eleven, and the main door was locked at the same time. To get in after that normally involved ringing for the porter, which automatically meant a report the following morning. Since the Green Anchor closed at ten-thirty and it was not much more than quarter of an hour's brisk walk to the hostel, it was generally easy enough to be in at the prescribed time. Patrick would look at the pipe soaring up toward their window, and make some expression of his determination to try it out. Frank would then guide him toward the front door.

"Wait till we have to."

The first time they had to was on a night when Patrick had insisted on seeing the barmaid home. She finally and reluctantly gave her consent conditionally on Frank accompanying them. They walked her back to a house in a mean street, and she

chastely permitted them to kiss her simultaneously—a cheek for each.

They heard the hostel clock striking the hour before they were in sight of the hostel itself. They quickened their steps yet further; there was a chance that the porter might not lock up on time. But when they reached the front they could see that the hope was a vain one; the big oak doors were firmly secured for the night.

Patrick said, "Damn, damn, damn! And only half a kiss at the gate. What do we do now?"

Frank looked up the wide front of the building to the small square that was the window of their room. Patrick's eye followed his.

"I suppose we could try it," Frank said.

Patrick drew in breath noisily through his nostrils. "Onward and upward," he said. "Excelsior!"

"Yes," Frank said. "But I'll lead the way. I don't trust your idea of what's a reasonable climb."

They walked over to the foot of the drain pipe, and examined it. Patrick got his hands round the pipe and shook it hard.

"Sound as a bell," he said. Frank had sat down and was taking his shoes off. "Ah yes." Patrick followed suit. "Tie them round our necks? I wish I'd remembered to put a new shoelace in. There's hardly any spare. Solution! Take the lace right out and just knot it round the first eyehole."

Frank said, "O.K. I'm ready. Give me five yards start, and let me keep it. No crowding on this course."

He began to climb, going steadily and looking only at the face of the wall directly before him. After a time he heard a cry—"We're off!"—from below, but did not look down. The climb was one that required continuous physical effort, but apart from that was not exceptionally difficult. It was rather hard on the toes.

At one stage, Patrick whistled. "That's a nice drop," he called. "That would give you fallen arches if you landed on your bare feet."

Frank said, "Don't be a fool, Paddy. Keep your eyes on the wall."

"Don't worry," Patrick said. "I've got a good head for heights. This is going very well. Damn good exercise."

"Save your breath," Frank said.

He reached the point where their own drain pipe branched away to the right, and carefully transferred himself onto it. It was a great deal more difficult to scale this pipe than the other; there was the problem of disposing of the excess weight brought into play by the flatter line of his body. The pipe was closer to the wall, in addition, which made his hold on it more precarious. He paused, trying to wrap himself round the pipe as well as he could, and called back.

"Paddy! This stretch is a lot trickier than the other. Hang on to the vertical till I've got right along it."

Patrick called, "Righto. I'll study the night sky."

Frank was glad that the diagonal length was a relatively short one. His muscles were aching when at last it turned upward again. He gave the go-ahead to Patrick, and prepared to complete the climb with what should be an easy final run. He heard Patrick gasping and cursing behind and to his left. Then he could see the window of their room level with him.

He locked his knees round the pipe and swung his body over to the right. He had a shock. From inside the window it had seemed that the pipe ran so close to it that transferring would be a simple matter. His viewpoint was now a different one. His fingers found the sill, but there was nothing to grip except the inside of the ledge. He relaxed his hold, and began thinking things over.

Patrick called, "What's the matter? Decided it's too early to go to bed?"

He did not look down. He said, "How do you fancy shinning all the way down again and ringing for the porter?"

Patrick said, "Paddy the Human Fly, that's me. Would you like me to bring you up some fish and chips at the same time?"

The total strain of the climb was beginning to tell. His arms felt very tired. There was risk involved even if he decided to go down, and got Patrick to agree. He looked at the window sill. They had left the window open, and the mechanism of its opening was such that it gave inward from hinges at the side. The gap was about a foot at the widest. He wished he could

remember if the inside ledge was the kind that would give a firm grip.

Patrick called, "You weren't serious about going down again? This blasted shoelace has me half choked as it is."

Frank inched himself higher up the pipe. It was the only thing to do; he tried to keep his mind from dwelling on the result of failure. Patrick called, "You're not going over the roof, are you?" Frank looked down at the window ledge. He was two or three feet above it. He would have to fling himself sideways and at the same time grab for the inside of the window. It was the sort of exercise that looked neat and only a trifle risky when worked out on paper. The point was: would he ever be able to bring himself to the point of jumping?

In a resigned voice, Patrick said, "Say something, if it's only 'Merry Christmas.' "

Frank said, "Stay where you are." His own voice sounded strange. He tensed himself against the pipe, but found the tension relaxing before his mind could say "Go!" Then, with sharp clarity, his mind seized on the essentials of his dilemma. If he waited only a few more minutes the attempt would become impossible. And that would leave the descent, in a state of fatigue made worse by nerves. Deliberately, he glanced down. The wall fell sheer for over seventy feet to the strip of flower border, narrow and dim in the moonlight. His heart seemed to expand and suddenly contract again. Then, without waiting any longer, he threw himself sideways at the window.

His shoulder slammed painfully against the upright, and he felt himself falling, out and down. There was an indistinguishable exclamation from Patrick beneath him. He brought his left arm down hard and heard rather than felt the crash as the pane went. His arm was through it, hooking on to the wood. When it creaked, he had a moment's fear that the window might slam shut, but the bar held. He pulled himself up, and levered himself through the narrow opening. When at last he stood up inside the room he felt something blinding his eyes and, putting his hand up, realized it was sweat.

He threw the window right open and looked out. Patrick was crouched on the pipe, staring up at him. Frank laughed.

"You can come up now!"

Patrick scaled the last few feet. Frank stretched his arms out, took Patrick's hands, and swung him easily across and into the room. Then he went to the door, and put the light on. Patrick's face was white.

Frank looked at the fragments of broken glass. "Another charge on the beer money. Still, we missed going on report."

Patrick said, "I thought you were a goner. I had no idea it was like that. You're bleeding too."

Blood was trickling down Frank's arm from the cut the glass had made; it was a gash about three inches long, but not deep. He stripped his jacket off, and washed the cut under the cold tap. Patrick turned and looked out of the window.

"Easier to go on report, I think," Frank said. "It's all right if there's somebody in the room, but otherwise . . ."

"There's a way of making it easy even without someone in the room," Patrick said. "I can rig up a metal grille and have it so that it can be fixed just inside the window. Then, if we leave the window right open, it's easy enough to swing over and grab the grille. Remind me to see about it this week end. Bill will let me have the stuff for it—aluminum would do nicely."

Frank turned away from the washbasin and reached for a towel. "Look," he said, "I've got a better idea. We'll get in by eleven in future. No barmaid's worth that."

Patrick grinned. "Not if that's all there is to be got out of her. I'm going to rig it up, all the same. You never know when there'll be an emergency."

The grille was made, and Patrick made a point of putting it in place each evening before they went out. On two or three occasions it was used; through Patrick's initiative they picked up a couple of local girls—sisters—and the good nights tended to become protracted.

They first met them in the cinema; they were sitting behind the girls and Patrick, after tickling the back of the younger girl's neck, turned the resulting indignation into an acquaintanceship which entailed their accompanying them home that evening and taking them out to a dance two evenings later.

The girls were seventeen and nineteen; they worked together in a multiple store. Patrick took Hilda, the younger, and Frank

was left with Mary. She was not unattractive, but gave the appearance of a heavier, underlined version of her sister, who was daintily pretty.

Patrick offered his commiserations to Frank on his relatively poorer luck. He discussed the girls frankly as possible means of sexual gratification but with the utmost friendliness toward them.

“I preferred her neck,” Patrick explained, “but I shouldn’t imagine it’s necessarily a good guide; I was just lucky. Mind you, from the point of view of quantity you’re on a good wicket. Child-bearing hips and at least one size larger brassiere. Mary’s a nice girl, too. If it were a question of marrying either of them, which God forbid, I’m not sure I shouldn’t take Mary. There’s something about Hilda’s mouth . . . teeth, perhaps—she looks as though she might bite.”

He talked gaily of his progress. “Would you believe it? The left one, but not the right. What can be so special about the right?”

“That’s the wooden one,” Frank said.

Patrick laughed. “The rate of attrition will have to increase, though. The way things are going on, I shall get my degree first, if not my old-age pension.”

Frank kept well concealed his determination to take over Hilda himself. During the early stages of their joint walking out he applied himself casually but with good effect to Mary; he found a pleasure of interest and power in observing the small signs of behavior which showed her increasing trust in and need for him. The catch in her breath was something to be sought for and achieved, patiently and carefully.

From that point of view, he knew, Hilda would not be so favorable a subject; she had a greater selfishness than her elder sister and so was less susceptible. Nor did her superior physical charm affect him. It was, he recognized, simply a question of taking something from Patrick—something that Patrick was not willing to give.

He went about the annexation with the same care that he gave to procuring Mary’s affection—the calculated look, the slight pressure on her arm when the opportunity offered. The most profitable approach was that of special intimacy; remarks

and small jokes were directed to Hilda, building up a web of recollection and awareness that excluded the other two. Her selfishness helped considerably; she naturally prized the more direct interest Frank showed above Patrick's casual friendly attentions. In a few weeks he knew he had secured her.

On a November afternoon, the four of them were in Liverpool without any definite purpose in view. They would probably have tea somewhere, and by the time that was over the cinemas would be open. Meanwhile they wandered with no immediate aim in the region of the Pier Head. Frank led the way onto the pier, down the ramp—slanting sharply since the tide was out—and through to the landing stage. The ferry boats huddled against the wharf, and beyond them the Mersey stretched gray and unfriendly, its heavy waters whipped into froth by an east wind.

Mary said, "Golly! I wouldn't like to be out on that, would you?"

The signboard directly facing them advertised the New Brighton ferry; it was due to leave in less than five minutes. Frank glanced at Hilda; she caught his eye and he winked at her solemnly. He said to Patrick, "How about it, Paddy? Just the thing to blow away the cobwebs. Feel like a trip to the golden sands?"

He used the jocular tone in which they were in the habit of discussing unlikely events. Patrick responded to it in the same way.

"I feel more like a trip to some golden toast, with or without sardines. What about you, Hil?"

Hilda looked at Frank. Frank said, "Have you got your mind fixed on toast as well, Mary?"

She nodded. "I'm ravenous. It must be the sea air."

Frank's look this time rested more pointedly on Hilda. He said, "Am I the only one anxious for the open main? It's going to be a lonely voyage."

Mary and Patrick laughed. Hilda said, "I don't feel very hungry just yet."

"That solves things then. Mary's ravenous and so is Paddy. Hilda and I aren't hungry for anything but the bounding waves." He took a hand each of Mary and Patrick and pressed

them together. "Bless you, my children. We'll see you again someday, and may all your troubles be little ones. Come on, Hilda. We've only just got time to climb aboard."

From the rail they looked down on the two faces on the landing stage. Mary was looking confused; Patrick grinned up with more cheerful bewilderment. Beside Frank, Hilda clutched his arm tightly. Her excitement was clear, and could be taken advantage of. He made up his mind that he would seduce her that afternoon.

He called down to the other two, "Don't forget to enjoy yourselves!"

Patrick was already in their room when he got back that night. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, reading a textbook on mechanics. He looked up as Frank entered.

"Well," he said. "The sailor home from sea."

Frank took off his raincoat and hung it up in his cupboard. "What was the toast like? Warm and crisp?"

"Cold and soggy. And then I got let in for a musical. How did you get on?"

Frank took his jacket off. He glanced at Patrick.

"Very pleasant." He paused. "I took the liberty of doing a little something for you. On the seaward side of the Fort, the tide being out."

"Doing something? You mean . . . ? Well, I'm damned!"

Frank watched his face. This was where the satisfaction was to be expected; not in the uneasy scuffling motions on the sand under the gray stone precipice of the Fort. Anger would be best, but almost any sign of discomfiture or resentment would be enough. And Patrick would not be able to hide it.

Frank said, "She's a very warmhearted girl. I'm surprised you've taken so long over it, Paddy."

Suddenly Patrick grinned. "Congratulations. You'll have to give me a few lessons. I'm just not up to your level." He nodded toward the gas ring. "Kettle's on. After a triumphal afternoon you shouldn't object to making the cocoa."

The two girls passed out of their lives not long afterward under the stress chiefly of lack of time that could be devoted to

them. The diversion, once again, came from Patrick. He was approached for a contribution to an Aid for Spain fund, the Spanish Republican position being then clearly in great need of contributions, and, after arguing with the collector, began an intensive course of reading up the situation. The reading naturally extended to other aspects of foreign affairs from the same left-wing point of view, and from that to domestic affairs. Patrick joined the ranks of what was described, to distinguish it from the university Labour party, as the Socialist party, and finally abandoned the Green Anchor for the premises of the party.

These were represented by the rooms of Stansfield, who was a lecturer in chemistry and whose persistent visions of himself as the "whole man" extended to a vague self-identification with Socrates—he was prepared to risk his career, his life, if that were necessary, in the cause of the intellectual liberation of youth. The precautions he took against being detected in the Socratic role were, as he frequently explained, adopted with reluctance. Against his own natural eagerness for complete frankness—for the dock even, if the capitalists should ever be prepared to push their persecution so far—he had to set the needs of a generation continually renewed. They could not be left without a guide.

He attempted to impress Frank with this aspect, when Patrick brought him along to join the group. He had a large and comfortable first-floor flat in a Victorian house which had been well converted; visitors reached the door of his flat without having to encounter any of the other people living in the house. Stansfield pointed this out.

"Glad to know you, Frank. Paddy's vouched for you as being the right sort of chap. It's a damn nuisance having to go in for this vouching and so on, but we can't expect true freedom of action with society in its present state. It's a handy thing about this place, actually, that people can't be seen coming or going. Funny thing to be pleased about, isn't it? Still, we have to take things as they are."

He was a small man, with a sallow face that was long in relation to his body, and black-rimmed spectacles. He spoke slowly and with nervous indecision. He was, Frank saw at once, a man who had failed and was only partially conscious of his failure.

He no longer imagined for himself material success, although it was clear that he would have enjoyed it; his self-delusion was in thinking that he exercised any real influence over the young men who came to his rooms simply because they were handy, and put up with his presence for the sake of their advantages.

Patrick had already discovered, and confided to Frank, that Stansfield was well off. In fact, he had a small private income in addition to his salary as a lecturer; his own needs were modest, and he was able to indulge his young visitors with open boxes of Turkish cigarettes, Chianti with the odd meals he provided, and a good supply of spirits.

Stansfield ushered the two of them in. "Throw your things on one of the chairs, and take a couple of pews. What are you boys having? Beer, sherry, Scotch?"

"Beer," Patrick said. "Got the new barrel tapped yet?"

"Tapped last night, and well sampled," Stansfield said. "Go and draw yourself a glass. Well, Frank, what's your poison?"

"Thanks. I'll have whisky."

Stansfield said, "And so will I. Now, Frank, are we going to have you in the party?"

Frank said, "Paddy does my political thinking for me."

"We'll teach you to think for yourself," Stansfield said confidently. "That's our first concern, eh, Paddy? Think for yourself and you'll come automatically to thinking the way we do. That's the beauty of Socialism."

He prepared a scratch meal for them, arranging things carelessly but with gusto. He put on a little apron for the purpose. His kitchen was equipped with a number of devices that Frank had only seen previously in American films, and the seating consisted of stools which pulled out from the table. While they were eating, Stansfield said to Frank, "You're on the arts side? Do you know Ted Galloway?"

Galloway was a big handsome third-year man, with a lame foot.

"Only by sight."

"He should be along this evening. I think he has a great future ahead of him. He has a—an essential grasp of things, along with a flair. He's going to be a big man."

Frank looked at him. "In any particular way?"

He had deliberately phrased the question mildly, but he saw Stansfield return his look with quick suspicion. He realized something else then—that all the converts were going to be big men. All they needed to do was to listen, and to argue not too powerfully, and the mantle would be thrown lightly across their shoulders.

Stansfield said, "In the movement, of course. But having an effect on the world outside as well."

Frank said, "Of course." He looked at Stansfield seriously. "I look forward to meeting him."

"Yes," Stansfield said happily. "He should be along some time tonight."

It was strange how vulnerable people were to silences. They talked and talked, arguing or agreeing, and yet it was easy to deflate both argument and agreement by a few words said at the right time, and by keeping one's mouth shut for the rest. The person it did not work with was John. He came back for the vacation and received Patrick's report of the university Socialist group with his usual calm tolerance of judgment.

"And have you swallowed all this guff as well, Frank?" he asked.

Frank said, "I suppose anything could be described as guff when viewed from the Olympian heights of Magdalen."

"Some things are guffier than others, though. I should not have thought you would have gone in for this kind of thing. Paddy's a different kettle of fish. I'm surprised."

Frank let Patrick take up furious cudgels in defense of Socialism in general and the university group in particular. He himself studied John, trying to see in what ways he had changed. Physically he had broadened out a good deal; what had been merely a superior tallness over Patrick was now a sign of maturity apparently far greater than the fifteen months that separated them. His hair had darkened slightly, but golden was still the adjective that described it best.

Mentally, the self-assurance that had always so prominently marked him was still more marked, but the effect it gave was different. The boy, grave and self-assured, had won others in part by the unusualness of the quality; it amused and interested

adults to be so treated by a child. Now, in all appearance a man, the assurance was still there; he would not be less successful on account of the change, but perhaps more.

Patricia had wandered into the room and entered the argument, surprisingly enough, on Patrick's side.

"We don't blame you, John," she explained, "so much as your environment. If you have to live in an atmosphere of the Middle Ages, it must be very difficult not to have what you think conditioned by it."

"Good God!" he said. "Oxford's simply swarming with Communists."

"Credit to them," she said, "for rising above it. In that case, it is your fault. If others can use their brains sensibly, so should you."

Patrick said with exasperation, "Communists aren't the point. Don't play into his hands by letting him talk about Communists. It's Socialism we're talking about."

John asked blandly, "What's the difference?"

"All the difference in the world. You might as well ask what the difference is between a Methodist and a Roman Catholic."

"Fundamentally there is none. Don't your brand of Socialists accept the Marxist dialectic as the basis of their faith?"

"Faith!" Patrick slammed his right fist into his left palm. "If you can't argue, the least you can do is avoid that kind of cheating—you can't bring in words like faith when we're talking about reason."

Patricia said, "But faith does come into it. Faith in all kinds of things. And I don't see what's wrong with bringing in the Communists, either. I think the Communists do things a lot more efficiently than the Socialists have done. Look at Spain."

The Spanish scene was the one permanent topic of conversation at Stansfield's; Patrick showed his irritation at having it thrust at him by someone who could not be expected to have his own wide knowledge of the affair.

"The only reason the Communists are more efficient in Spain is that Russia is the only country giving reasonable support to the Republican government."

"Of course," Patricia said. "That's what I meant."

"No, it isn't. How could it be?"

"I," said Patricia, "know what I meant."

"You obviously don't—all that blether about faith, and then talking about greater efficiency."

John said, "As an impartial bystander, I don't see how the claim to greater efficiency can be refused. Socialism may have killed its thousands, but Communism its tens of thousands."

"That's just where the lie can be pinned down," Patrick said. He was flushed and angry; it was as strange, Frank thought, that the anger should come so quickly as that it should be so easily dissipated. "Where are the purges of Socialism? Where are the mass starvations of Socialism? That's precisely the difference. Communism uses killing as a means to its ends. Socialism is opposed to violence."

John raised one eyebrow. "Purges? Mass starvation? Off the point, Paddy. We were talking about the war in Spain. If the Communists believe in killing and the Socialists object to violence, then the Communists must be more efficient. Wars are for killing people, you know."

Frank said, "Argument doesn't alter things, does it? Either the world's going Socialist or it isn't. I think it is, personally."

He spoke in the flat emphatic way which he had found to be effective at Stansfield's.

John said, "Do you? Do you, really?"

This time there was more irony than surprise; John was looking at him with a trace of amusement and with something else. It wasn't quite suspicion, but it was enough to make him uneasy.

He said, "And whichever way it goes, I imagine I shall get on all right."

He had changed his tone to one which Patrick could accept as one of mock blasphemy, and John as one of more fundamental cynicism. They both accepted it.

John said, "That's more like our old Frank. The unscrupulous schoolmaster. He who gets by."

"Leave him in his decadence," Patrick said. "Come on down to the factory. I told Bill I'd look in this morning."

"And aren't you going to get by?" John asked. "Will you refuse any post that isn't labeled Chief Commissar of the

People's Cable Factories? Or will you settle for a capitalist directorship on the side?"

"Capitalism won't exist then."

"I agree," Patricia said. "Faith—what did I say?"

She and John were laughing together as the other two went out.

The clubfooted Galloway, touchy in his two-year seniority, presented the only real opposition to Frank's emergence as the power in Stansfield's group. He had been, of all the many apples of Stansfield's eye, the sweetest; Frank guessed that his striking male beauty, enhanced like Baldur's by the one crippled foot, had had much to do with it. Frank's own assumption rested on surer psychological grounds; he had been the hardest to convert and made a point of being just sufficiently independent of the group viewpoint to be distinctive without being heretical.

Galloway, as Frank guessed he would, played into his hands in due course. Frank had teased him with small pinpricks for some weeks, and at last provoked the outburst one evening toward the end of winter. There were seven or eight present in Stansfield's flat, drinking his Chianti and eating bread and cheese. Galloway had been waxing enthusiastic over a propaganda scheme he had thought of; he wanted to have leaflets printed on gummed-back paper so that they could stick them up prominently in the city.

"With a really good gum on the back, they'll stick so fast that it will need paint scrapers to get them off. Most people won't go to that length. If they're only on six-by-four sheets, it will be easy enough to find odd spots to stick them—conspicuous spots too."

Frank saw that it was his chance. It was the kind of scheme that one enthusiastic person was likely to get carried through, especially—in this case—Galloway, but it would be carried more for want of opposition than in real support. There were too many inconveniences attached to it for it to appeal strongly to the members of the group. The greatest inconvenience, of course, was the possibility of being detected going round the streets at night sticking the leaflets on the walls. Subversive activities of this kind were tacitly regarded as a preserve of the

Communists, and were considered to have a vulgar aspect. It was probable, Frank thought, that only a growing unsureness of his own position could have led Galloway into an enthusiasm that overlooked this.

Stansfield said, "Ye-es. I suppose it would be . . . be a useful form of advertisement."

"The point is," Galloway went on eagerly, "that it's a way of appealing to the kind of person who is likely to listen with a fairly open mind to our case. The Commies go about slapping paint on the walls, and that's exactly what puts intelligent people off them. 'United Front Now!' To see that in straggling white paint with the last word crammed in because they've come to the end of the wall . . . It's the sort of thing schoolboys would do, and they get credited with being mentally schoolboys."

One or two laughed at the reference to the last word crammed in. Frank said, "And the apparatus? Jam jars full of water—slung from pieces of string? Spilling would be a problem, unless we have caps for them."

He had spoken politely and in reasonable inquiry. Galloway looked at him with dislike.

"What the hell are you talking about? Jam jars? We aren't going fishing for tiddlers."

"You probably have more spit than I have," Frank said. "But you'll need every bit of it if you are going to spend an evening licking the backs of six-by-four leaflets and sticking them on walls. If I were doing it I should certainly need something full of water—a jam jar would be as good as anything else I can think of."

Stansfield laughed. "It's a point. And, of course, the water would be likely to spill."

They were, Frank saw, ready to welcome any reasons for not adopting Galloway's scheme; Galloway, in his eagerness, was clearly unaware of the underlying temper.

"Well, we can use something like that," Galloway said. "The spilling's easily got over. Some kind of screw-top bottle—some of Alec's old beer bottles."

"And brushes?" Frank asked. "I suppose we should have to take up brushes that would fit the beer bottles. It would be

pretty grim spreading the water on the sticky backs with our fingers. In the dark, especially."

Galloway said impatiently, "That's a small matter. It's easy enough to get hold of old brushes that could be used. We aren't going to let little details of that kind hamper us."

Stansfield said reprovingly, "You know, Ted, the little details are just as important as the big plans in any campaign. Nails and horseshoes and so on."

"They can all be got over, though," Galloway said. "There's no real difficulty in working out ways of getting over them. We have to concentrate on the important thing: getting the message across."

There was a brief silence. Frank said thoughtfully, "Placing will be important, I imagine. What about a couple on the notice board in chapel? They should get read there. And Alec can slap one on the common room board."

It was Patrick who laughed, and the rest, apart from Galloway, joined in a few seconds later. The boldness of the scheme had been translated into a ludicrous kind of cheek. Frank looked at Galloway. Galloway got to his feet, brushing his glass with his arm as he did so; the glass teetered, throwing out splashes of wine, before it settled back on its base. The laughter died away as they saw Galloway get up.

He said, "You've done nothing but sabotage things since you came along, Bates. I suppose it's the only thing you're any good at, but some of us are fed up with it."

Stansfield said, "Well now, Ted . . ."

Frank said, "I thought the idea was for us to hammer things out here. If you're going to do that, you've got to have criticism of some kind. And you've got to take it in the spirit in which it's given."

"I know the spirit in which it's given," Galloway said. "Bourgeois cynicism—that's the spirit."

"It doesn't help slinging insults," Frank said. The coolness in his mind was a special pleasure, feeding on the flame of Galloway's anger. "Especially when they're silly ones. I come from the working class. I'm the last person you can call bourgeois."

Galloway's father, it was known, ran a couple of hardware

shops. It was clear, watching the faces of the rest, that the point was well taken. Galloway leaned forward.

"I know one thing," he said. "There isn't room, Bates, for you and me in this group. One of us had better get out. I suggest we put it to a vote of the others. Will you accept that? Will you agree to clear out if the vote goes against you?"

One thing, Frank thought, that Galloway would never know was how to gauge the effect he had on other people. If such a vote were taken, he would not have a single person on his side. The fact of Galloway's isolation was clear enough without a vote; he had worked for it, and he had got it. He himself was not going to be such a fool as to exploit the situation in as clumsy a way as Galloway, in his place, would have done.

He did not want Galloway out of the group; and if he were determined to go out, Frank was not going to be the successful participant in an ostracism—even though Galloway had asked for it. It would not help him to be associated, in the minds of the others, with such a banishment. The thing to be aimed at was Galloway still inside the group but impotent.

Frank said slowly, "No. I'm afraid I won't accept it. I don't think personal attitudes are important enough to allow them to lead to that kind of thing. As far as I'm concerned, you'll just have to put up with disliking me, Ted. And with my criticizing points I think are doubtful in some of the schemes you put up. We'll have a vote on that leaflet scheme of yours, if you like. I'm against it, personally. I think it's going to be awkward to carry it out, and it's likely to get us into trouble with the authorities unnecessarily. I don't know what the others think."

Stansfield said, "I think Frank's right on both things. We don't want to throw anyone out; there aren't all that many of us that we can afford to throw people out. And as to the leaflet scheme—it's just the fact that the trouble would not only outweigh the benefits, but also it might prevent our doing something of real importance in the future. Don't forget—we have to think of the future."

Watching Galloway's face, Frank saw that for the first time he was understanding just how Stanfield's concern for the future was founded on fear in the present.

Stansfield went on, "So I propose a vote on the leaflet scheme. Those against?"

Stansfield put his own hand up, and the others followed. Frank waited until all, apart from Galloway's, were raised, before he raised his own hand.

"I think that rules it out, Ted," Stansfield said. "It was a good idea in its way, but . . ."

He broke off as Galloway pushed his chair back. With a single glance at Frank, Galloway went out of the room. They heard the front door bang behind him.

"Ted's a little upset," Stansfield said. "More wine, anybody? Frank?"

Frank pushed his glass over for Stansfield to fill. Before he did so, Stansfield reached for a cloth and wiped away the wine that had spilled from Galloway's glass; he was fussy about small things.

What a fool, Frank thought—above all, to leave like that—to leave a bad impression crystallizing into a worse one. It was odd to what an extent one could count on other people being fools.

He went to Long View, one day during the Easter vacation, to find only Mrs. Manson in the house. John had gone to stay for a few days with a friend of his from Oxford. Patricia's secretarial college had not yet broken up. Diana, of course, was on duty at her hospital. Patrick, he knew, had had to go to the dentist, but he had thought he might be back by this time. It was getting on for four o'clock.

Mrs. Manson said, "Thank God it's you, Frank—I thought it might have been one of my own. I'm desperately lazy and desperately thirsty. You and Di are the only ones who would be likely to spoil me by making tea. The others would bully me into making it myself."

When he brought her the tea in from the kitchen, he said, "It looks as though Paddy's having it hot and strong. The appointment was for two, wasn't it?"

She took the tea. "Thank you, Frank. I have an impression that there was a fair amount needed doing. It's a very long time since he went—the son of a doctor, but he won't take ordinary common-sense precautions. He knows his teeth are his weak

spot: Pat collared all the calcium. You started smoking again, yet? Throw me the packet over from the mantel shelf, will you?"

Frank got up to get the cigarettes, and stayed to shake the small glass bell that stood there. It tinkled with a peculiar pebbly sound.

"I've been lucky with mine so far," he said.

"So have the others. I can't understand Paddy. Nearly all the time he's terribly brave, but the odd thing beats him completely. The dentist does. Now you, Frank, if your teeth gave trouble—I imagine you would attend scrupulously every six months to keep the running repairs to a minimum."

He tinkled the bell again. "I should think so."

"Poor old Paddy! He understands that, you know—he can see that he should. But he won't." The doorbell rang. "Might be him now; he's probably forgotten his key again. Could you, Frank? It's Susie's day off."

It was not Patrick that Frank let in, but Mr. Lucus. He eased himself into an armchair. "In time for tea? I've been pickled up to the eyebrows all day in annealing muck, so I thought I'd take a break. Oliver out?"

Mrs. Manson nodded. "Doing his rounds. I keep at him, but the practice tends to balloon. Partly your fault, Bill. Is there no limit to your expansion?"

Mr. Lucus patted his belly. "Not to this one. Thanks, Frank. You make a good cup. I think the factory's about reached its limit. The new Insulating Shop's the last on the schedule. Unless we have a war, of course."

Mrs. Manson looked up. "Don't talk about a war."

"A war soon, and soon over—while the boys are still at university. That's the best thing to hope for, Julia. If not, you'll have years of waiting for it to happen."

"John's only got just over a year now."

He nodded. "I know. Oh, I ran into Paddy's senior lecturer at a do in Liverpool the other night."

"Griffin?" Frank asked.

"That's him. Very opinionated fellow. He has a very good opinion of Paddy, though. He predicts great things for him. He rather scared me."

Mrs. Manson smiled. "Scared you? Why?"

"Scared me of losing him. He may want to go on to something bigger than the kind of job I can make for him in A.C. I'm an old fool, Julia. I've spent much too much time looking forward to having Paddy with me in a year or two's time."

"An old fool of a bachelor," Mrs. Manson said, "suborning a mother's child."

He looked at her quickly, as though uncertain as to how serious she was. "At any rate, I'd keep him here in Holly Ash for you. And you've got three other children." He nodded casually toward Frank. "Not forgetting the half."

"I try not to have ambitions for them," Mrs. Manson said. "I can't help thinking they will all do very well—except perhaps, Diana, and she may surprise me—but it's very likely the usual kind of mother's wishful thinking."

"You don't know how lucky you are. You've reared a first-class brood. If I could have been sure of having children like them, I'd have married."

"Married whom?"

"Anybody. All the same, Paddy's my favorite—you know that. His mind thinks the way mine does, and thinks a lot better. That's the trouble. He may be so much better that I won't get him."

"I shouldn't worry about that," Mrs. Manson said. "He doesn't change his mind very easily after he's set it on something. I remember, when they were all little, he was desperately keen to go to a circus that had come to the village we lived in. We were going to take them, but then, in the end, Oliver got the car out and ran them all into London, to see a really big circus and have a tea in a restaurant—they loved having teas out. The other three were as pleased as anything about it but Paddy was miserable. He wanted to go to the little circus in the village."

"You cheer me up," Mr. Lucus said. "I'll go back and put the mangy lions through their paces with a better heart."

The doorbell rang again.

"I knew he'd forgotten his key," Mrs. Manson said. "Will you let him in, Frank?"

Stansfield did not hesitate to adopt Frank as his favorite after the episode with Galloway. At the same time, Stansfield himself had changed to some extent as a result of the incident. He deferred to Frank, but he did not defer as wholeheartedly as he had done with Galloway. It was as though the clash of the two students had reawakened his sense of his own importance; as though he were determined that his own position as the only man in a group of undergraduates and, moreover, the provider of food and drink and shelter, should be recognized.

His natural fussiness rode the course, and was given full rein. Where he had been in the habit of letting the others use his flat when he was not in himself—there were a number of keys passed around and one was generally kept under a stone outside the door by which they entered the house—he now insisted that they should visit only when he was present, and at what he regarded as reasonable hours. He had reasons for this—the people in the flat below had complained of the noise one night—but they were not reasons he would have thought good before.

And his hospitality in food and drink, while it did not diminish, became less easy. He made occasional joking reference to his own largess, and showed a complacency when some particular treat was brought out that was unlike his old self.

The others noticed the changes in behavior; Patrick commented on them at times.

“Very decent omelet tonight, but I wish Alec wouldn’t serve it up as though he’d not only made it but laid the eggs as well—quite apart from tearing the chicken’s liver out with his own bare hands!”

But the others did not take the change too seriously; the whole thing became a joke and was tolerated, and even in a way welcomed, as a joke. Frank, on the other hand, felt it as a growing irritation. In part this was because, as the new favorite, he got more of it than the others did. He was, after a fashion, the head prefect, and came in now and then for benevolent magisterial harangues.

“I rely on you to get them to rinse the plates out before they find some reason for dashing off, Frank. The girl gets frightfully fed up if there’s a mountain of stuff in the sink when she comes

in the morning. And it's not to be wondered at, you know. After all, I presume they lend a hand at home. I hope they do, anyway."

But the real source of irritation was in the feeling of having been cheated by Stansfield. This did not exist for the others. To Frank, it seemed that Stansfield took advantage of his own success against Galloway. It was the situation that upset him rather than any rancor against Stansfield personally. He did not think that Stansfield in himself was sufficiently important to merit rancor.

The best thing to do, he decided, was to humiliate Stansfield. He had worked out the man's probable reactions. A humiliation conducted in private might persuade him simply to cut Frank off from the group; there were a number of ways in which he might be able to do this. A humiliation, on the other hand, in front of the whole of the group might cause him to cut himself off from the others—to dissolve the group itself or force it to find other quarters for meeting. If that happened, Frank would incur the odium of having been responsible for the loss of their comforts and advantages.

The alternative he decided on was the humiliation of Stansfield with one witness present. If it were carefully handled, it would not be too severe for Stansfield, and he would hardly be likely to force Frank out of the group, knowing the motive that might be imputed to him if he did.

He went over to the flat with Patrick one afternoon; for various reasons none of the others was likely to be present and, in fact, there was only Stansfield there. He had bought strawberries and a small bottle of champagne, and he served these up for the three of them with his usual gourmet's air.

"Why anyone should ever eat them with cream if they can get champagne is utterly beyond me. Utterly."

Patrick said, "I shall make a point of always having champagne with my strawberries from now on."

"No, but I'm serious," Stansfield said.

"So am I," Patrick said. He winked at Frank.

Stansfield reached for the bottle. "I said: if they can get champagne. The thing to remember is that there are millions who can't get champagne or strawberries or cream. We must

always remember them. It's a good thing to have a taste for decent food and wine, but there are things that are more important than that."

"A taste for women is," Patrick said.

Stansfield said sharply, "Paddy, there are times when you are a bit too frivolous. I'm trying to impress on you, my boy, that you should thank whatever gods there be for the good fortune that comes your way, while at the same time resolving to bring that good fortune, as far as it's possible, to those who haven't got it."

It was his usual kind of discourse. Patrick listened gravely, nodding at intervals.

Frank said, "I wonder what you're going to do after the Revolution, Alec?"

He spoke in an ordinary speculative tone. Stansfield spooned up his strawberries.

"One never thinks about it. You might as well ask a Christian what he's going to do when he gets to Heaven."

"I should think Hell would be a better analogy." Stansfield glanced up. "Just think of it, Alec—no one to patronize. No one to offer strawberries and champagne to, because it will all have been shared out, anyway."

Patrick laughed. Stansfield gazed at Frank slowly. He saw, clearly enough, the seriousness of the accusation behind the bantering way in which it was said.

Stansfield said, "That's not a very nice thing to say, is it, Frank?"

"No, it isn't really, is it?" Frank said. "Especially when I've just finished eating the strawberries. But that's the sort of thing you will have to expect if you're dishing things out after the Revolution. They'll take the strawberries and take them for granted as well. Nobody's going to say Good Old Alec, Generous Old Alec. They may ask what the hell you were doing with the strawberries in the first place."

Patrick had stopped smiling, and was watching them both. Stansfield looked a shade relieved; as though a dangerous corner had been passed. He said, "Ah, I see what you mean—from the political point of view. But, you know, the worker is not

vindictive. He isn't going to brood over the centuries in which he's been dispossessed. The worker looks to the future."

He was taking the conversation into the happy impersonal realms of theoretical politics. He had shown his fear and uncertainty; he was an easier target than Galloway had been.

"No," Frank said, "it's you I was thinking of, Alec. You, yourself. What a rough time you're going to have when everything is shared out fairly by the Socialist state. It's not only that you won't be able to act the Lord Bountiful with strawberries and champagne. That would hurt you, but there are other things that would hurt more."

Stansfield said, "Frank! I don't . . ."

"You see," Frank said, "without the bounty, what are you going to do for an audience? Where are you going to get your young men from? Not on account of your sparkling wit, or the wisdom they're likely to get from sitting at your feet." He paused, looking at Stansfield and smiling. "And it wouldn't be because of your physical charm, would it?"

He let the smile, which had been cold and appraising, become a more natural one, blunting the edge of truth in the things he had just been saying. He finished in mock-serious tones.

"So I think the only thing you can do after the Revolution, Alec, is retire. Retire on your credit. You can console yourself with thinking how nobly you've worked to deprive yourself of your chief pleasures in life."

There was a silence when Frank stopped speaking. In that silence, he knew that he had won. Stansfield at last took the empty bowls and put them on a tray. He smiled uncertainly.

"I'll take these into the kitchen and rinse them."

He left the room, and closed the door behind him. As he did so, Patrick said, "You did that deliberately, Frank."

There was amazement and some anger in his voice.

Frank said, "Did what?"

"I don't understand it." Patrick got up from his chair; he started to go toward the kitchen door, and then came back to face Frank. "Why say things like that to Alec?"

"Alec should have learned to take jokes against himself by now."

"But it wasn't a joke."

"No, it was the truth. Wasn't it?"

"Yes, maybe. Partly. But that doesn't excuse it. It might if you had been angry, but you weren't."

"You're taking it a bit too seriously, aren't you?"

"I saw his face just before he went out. Good God, you did too! How could you possibly . . . and the worst of it is that I'm certain you had it all planned in advance."

Frank looked at him. "Why should I?"

"I don't know why, but I'm certain all the same."

Frank said, "Alec annoyed me. He's annoyed me a lot lately. You must have noticed the way he's changed, yourself, and I think I've had more of it than you have. I don't think it did him any real harm to be forced to realize for a moment that he isn't a little tin god."

He watched Patrick as he spoke, and thought at first that he was convincing him. But when he had finished, Patrick said, "The thing that's really so funny is that I've known you all this time without really knowing you. You put on an act to Alec, and now you're putting one on to me, trying to make me think you had lost your temper with him. You hadn't, though. You hadn't lost your temper; you were doing something you had worked out."

For the first time that afternoon, Frank was aware of his own emotions. A sick anger rose in him, directed against himself. He had handled the thing badly, since he had allowed himself to be detected. He knew he would not be able to persuade Patrick away from this new conviction, and it was one which could damage him, and damage him badly. The only thing he could do was to use the anger he now felt.

He said sharply, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about. For that matter, I don't care. If you think Alec's been so brutally treated, you'd better go and console him at the sink. I don't see any sense in staying here."

Patrick said, "I don't understand it, Frank." Their eyes met for a few seconds. "I think I will go in and give Alec a hand. Are you staying?"

Without answering, Frank turned and left the room and the flat.

He went to a cinema, and got back to the hostel about ten o'clock. There was no sign of Patrick having returned. He undressed, and folded his clothes on the chair. He had had a drink of beer on the way back from the cinema, and so did not bother to make himself cocoa. Before he got into bed, he walked across to the window and looked out to the dark sky and the shapes, dim white in the distance, of the university buildings. His hand rested on the metal grille Patrick had made and installed. His fingers tightened on it.

What a fool. Patrick's amazement was nothing to his own at his stupidity. To have miscalculated with Patrick of all people. Staring out into the night, he told himself that he would never again make that mistake—of taking a person for granted simply through long acquaintance. He was able to be angry with Patrick as well now. Patrick had no right suddenly to become astute. He wondered where Patrick was. Probably with Stansfield still, drinking with him to soothe his injured pride.

The whole thing had turned out wrong. Physical tension was high in him; his fingers plucked at the grille again, and at last, almost automatically, wrenched it loose. He threw it on the floor, feeling the tension release. Then he went to bed.

He did not sleep; his mind revolved on the means he should have used to achieve his end. He should have known, from the beginning, that Stansfield was so weak that only the lightest pressure, the merest innuendo, would be sufficient to crack him. It would have been easy. His mind framed the words, the tone which would have conveyed all that was necessary; to Stansfield but not to Patrick.

Patrick's voice broke in on his mind's restless tossing. He knew at once that he was out on the pipe—that it must be past lights-out. Patrick called softly, "Frank! I can't see the grille."

He made no answer to that. He lay in the warmth of his bed, thinking of Patrick outside, clinging to the drain pipe. He had pulled the grille out without forethought of this, but now he was glad of it.

Patrick called again, more loudly, "Frank, are you in there? The grille . . ."

He did not answer at once, but finally said, "The grille's broken. You'll have to jump for it."

There was relief in Patrick's voice. "Get up and give me a hand in, will you?"

"You can jump it," he said. "I had to."

"There's no sense if you're in the room. I'm getting cramped, Frank. Come and give a hand, will you?"

"No. I'm comfortable. Jump it."

This time Patrick made no immediate reply. At last, he said, "I'm scared. I can't help it. I'm just scared."

"So was I," Frank said. "Now jump."

"I can't!"

Frank did not reply again. He lay with his eyes on the brighter square of the window. At last he heard the scuffling scratching noise, saw the dark shape against the window, and knew that it would fall.

He was getting out of bed as the scream came up to him.

5

The day had already begun to cloud when Cartwright drove him to the A.C. sports ground, and by the time they reached the swimming pool, heavy gray clouds were rolling up. The pool seemed unchanged, except that a wooden grandstand had been pulled into place on the west side. The grandstand was packed with spectators, and there were others standing at the opposite side and at each end. The judges' chairs had been set up in front of the grandstand, and Cartwright and Bates took two empty chairs there.

"We don't have to do the judging, thank God," Cartwright said. "We just sit and watch."

Bates said, "There is a change. I see they've put a new spring-board up."

"A change? Was the pool here in your time?"

Bates nodded. "It was the first part of the sports ground to be completed."

"But you weren't in A.C. then, were you? Didn't you . . . ?" He broke off, clearly finding the recollection of what he had been told of Bates's entry into the firm an unsuitable subject for discussion. He laughed, rather too loudly. "I suppose you used to slip in under the fence like the kids do now."

Bates looked at him obliquely. "Oh, no. On invitation. I used to swim here with one of your predecessors, as a matter of fact. Bill Lucas."

"Lucas? The fellow who runs Sinterden?"

"Yes. I take it you haven't met him."

"Sinterden's a good way off. I run back to Llyntany now and then; I used to be there." It was apparent that a thought had struck him. "Lucas used to be in charge here? What made him go to Sinterden? It's been on the down grade since before this place was started."

"A personal loss," Bates said. "He wanted to leave Holly Ash. He went to London first and then, during the war, he went down to Sinterden."

"His wife?" Cartwright asked.

"No. No relation, as a matter of fact."

"Life," said Mr. Cartwright, "is a funny thing. I suppose Milly and I shouldn't have been here, but for that."

The swimming competitors were beginning to appear from the changing sheds. The wind had got a good deal fresher; they stood, miserable and goose-fleshed, beside the gray rippled waters of the pool.

Bates said, "You like it here, then?"

"It suits me very well. It's a funny thing—I like a place to be new. Old places are all right for holidays—Milly and I generally spend our holidays motoring around and having a look at old places. Chester's a nice place now. But for living in for the rest of the year, I like something new, with a good coat of paint on it."

"That's Holly Ash," Bates said.

The swimming events dragged to a close with a procession of antics by men in comic swimming costumes. They were applauded enthusiastically by the crowd and by Cartwright. After that the crowd moved away from the pool to join the other

crowd already watching the field events. These were somewhat less miserable. The sun reappeared fitfully, and there was an exciting half-mile race with the two best runners neck-and-neck all the way. Then it was time to present the prizes.

Bates saw no one he knew, either in the crowd or among the competitors who came up for their collar studs and compacts, and sets of fish knives and biscuit barrels. It was hardly surprising. He had not known many of the A.C. men in the past, and it would only be by the kind of accident that had brought the encounter with Sid that he could expect to meet one of them now. But he had abandoned the particular fruits of ambition a very long time before; that afternoon in the Manor House, or perhaps even earlier. The satisfaction he had was a satisfaction of demonstrating something to himself.

He looked over the heads of the crowd at the great sweep of close-clipped lawn grass where once, at this time of the year, the Prentice wheat had lifted its million green needles. The galvanized-iron fence in the distance stood just about at the field's end; there had been a stone wall there, with a drop in the ground on the other side. On that side brambles had grown high and tangled against the wall. In the late summer, coming back from the village school, Ronnie and Sid and he had gorged themselves on blackberries.

The Foremen's Tea was held in a big marquee behind the clubhouse. Everyone of the rank of foreman or higher was expected to attend, and wives were also invited. It was for this function more than for any other part of the Gala Day that the presence of a director was necessary. Foremen's Teas had been inaugurated in all the A.C. factories by Sir Joshua himself, and possessed a particular sanctity in consequence. The tables were arranged in a wide U, with the high table, at which Bates presided, between the arms.

He had given some thought to the kind of speech he would make. There were two dangers to avoid—the pompousness of a young man trying to sound old, and the silliness of a young man telling older men what to do.

When Cartwright had introduced him, facetiously and at some length, he made the speech that he had decided on. He ran through a factual account of some of the more recent de-

velopments in A.C. affairs, and told them some of the plans for the future. They listened in respectful silence, impressed at being taken into directorial confidence. Then, abruptly, he switched into telling them a couple of long and involved funny stories. By the time he reached the climax of the second one, they were all laughing. He broke off neatly, and sat down to sustained applause.

Cartwright said: "Damn good show! You made Milly laugh all right. I thought she was going to bust her stays."

Bates smiled. Demonstrated as required, he thought. A boy, talking to the nodding wheat, green in early summer. Bow down; and they bowed. A dream, but a waking dream.

He would not need to come to Holly Ash again.

five

He had been out of the room for a few minutes. When he returned, Smethers pointed to the telephone, which was off its rest and lying on his desk.

"For you. A girl."

Smethers's head went down to his work as Frank sat down opposite him and picked up the receiver. Down, but very far from out. He had been pleased when Smethers, a second lieutenant, had been posted to work with him a couple of months before, because the prospects were of an expanding department and his own captaincy simultaneous with Smethers's second pip. But at a very early stage of their acquaintance he had realized that curiosity, carefully concealed but none the less demanding for that, was the chief trait in Smethers's generally unattractive personality.

He said, "Hello. Frank Bates here."

Patricia's voice; she spoke in a rush, as though speech had been damming up while she waited for him to come to the telephone. She was excited.

"It's Pat. Oh, damn! I'm sorry—that was my handbag. Frank, where do you think I am? What do you . . . ?"

He broke in. "Tell me first. Are you an officer and a lady?"

"Well, yes, an officer anyway. And I've got my posting."

"Let me guess. Moscow? New York? The Orkneys?"

"London! Isn't it wonderful?"

"Well," he said, "I know how devoted you are to me . . ."

"Oh, you fool, Frank!" She laughed. "I didn't mean that. I just meant that London . . ."

"Don't make it even worse by explaining. We shall have to celebrate. Can you be free this evening?"

"Yes, of course I can. Any time."

"I can be clear by six. Can I rely on you to find Trafalgar Square? I'll see you by Nelson's column."

"At six? I'll be there."

Frank looked at Smethers as he replaced the receiver; he was writing industriously. He said "Peter" softly and, when Smethers did not immediately look up, repeated it more loudly. This time Smethers did look up. He had a narrow spectacled face. Normally it was sullen; occasionally the sullenness gave way to a curious eager smile.

Frank said, "I've just been arranging to meet a very old friend tonight. If those other movement orders should come in this afternoon, can I leave them to your care?"

Smethers nodded. "Yes, of course. I'm not doing anything." He bent to his work again and then, as though remembering that he should not make too great a point of his disinterest in Frank's affairs, lifted his head once more.

"Hope you have a very pleasant time."

"Thanks." An advantage of having Smethers was that he was always perfectly willing to work late, on either his own behalf or Frank's. It was an advantage that Frank did not generally profit from; not because of any apprehension that his junior's conscientiousness might be marked by their superiors—he knew that both Major Slate and Colonel Druce-Ruck were impressed only by character and that they did not care for Smethers's—but because he himself enjoyed working, even on the routine of troop transportation which was his present business. But it was pleasant to feel that his evenings were not always lying under the shadow of possible rush jobs.

Smethers was still engrossed in his papers when Frank left a little before six. He had an impression that Smethers had been spinning the work out in the late afternoon; the movement

orders had not come down. He glanced back at the hunched figure with amusement. Probably if he came back quietly along the corridor in a couple of minutes and peeped through the glass panel he would see Smethers patiently ruffling through the contents of his drawer. He had made such a return, soon after Smethers's arrival, when he had first suspected the man's overweening curiosity. It was unnecessary to do the same thing again.

He found Patricia waiting for him as appointed, and kissed her. She broke away awkwardly and looked at him uncertainly.

"Is that . . . aren't we disgracing the King's uniform, or something? I'm not very well up in the rules."

He took her arm. "Fraternal affection. You're my sister. We can probably get away with that in any situation short of a general court martial. I know a pleasant little pub round the corner. Come and have whatever they happen to have in, and you can tell me all the news."

It was over a year since he had seen her; she had been in the A.T.S. for that time, and their leaves had not coincided. She had filled out a lot. Her figure, which had been somewhat less than average for her height, was now clamant on the attention, even beneath the khaki uniform.

She said, "My buttons are polished."

He grinned. "Are they? I hadn't noticed. Gin and bitters? I'm not sure there is anything else except beer."

"I don't mind. Whatever you're having."

He placed her at a table in an alcove, and came back there with the drinks a little later. There were only a couple of others in the bar; two middle-aged men sitting side by side on stools, reading identical pages of identical evening newspapers. The barmaid had gone to polish glasses at the far end. It was very peaceful and secluded.

"Here's to your commission, Pat," he said. "I haven't congratulated you yet. What are they going to give you to do, now that they've commissioned you and posted you to London? I suppose they'll have some work for you."

"Still wireless," she said. "And still secret. And you haven't got any more promotion yet? I'm creeping up on you. John's got his third—did you know?"

He shook his head. "He does it the hard way. Fancy having to fight for promotion—I mean, really fight. How is he, by the way? What's the latest news? I haven't had anything since a note, when he was in Cairo nine months ago."

"He doesn't write very much, but Mummy had a letter last week. He says he's well and the flies are a bloody nuisance; I suppose that's all that we can expect to hear from him."

"And what about things at home?"

"Mummy's pretty much as usual, but Daddy's been having his attacks more often. She's been trying to get him to give the practice up altogether, but he won't, of course. He had a terrible attack during my last leave; we thought he was dying."

He nodded. "I suppose Di could stay at home if things were to get really bad."

"Yes. Daddy's always joking about her being slow to nobble a doctor, but I think he's glad enough to have her no farther away than Liverpool and coming home at week ends."

"No prospects of nobbling?"

"I don't think she's interested."

"And what about you, Pat? How do your romantic affairs stand? Loving them and leaving them, like a true soldier?"

She smiled. "You know how it is."

"Do I? I suppose I can guess. If you are going to be stationed here in the big city, I shall have to exercise brotherly care in looking after you. It looks as though it might prove a full-time job."

She looked at him quizzically over her glass. "You're different, Frank."

"Different? How?"

"More relaxed—at ease. You don't give that impression of—of waiting for the other person to say something that you used to do."

"That's the effect of independence going to my head. The citizens always had me in their pockets. Now I'm a free man."

"You were never in anybody's pocket. I always used to envy the way you did things. I used to fly into tempers with John when he wanted me to do things I didn't want to do, but I always had to do them in the end. You just didn't argue. You

did things if you knew you had to—that was all. I used to try to imitate you, but I was never very successful."

Frank smiled. "I remember some of those rows you had with John. You gave him more trouble than the rest of us put together. I used to feel that you could have been handled better."

"How?"

"It was his impassiveness that infuriated you so much. All that violence of yours was on the surface; you were quite a soft little girl underneath. What you needed was not calm discipline but a certain amount of violence in return. That would have tamed you better. But it wasn't the sort of thing John could do, was it?"

"That's nonsense. Violence would have made me more violent. You don't know what I'm like underneath."

They had dinner together and he walked her back to her quarters fairly early; she had told him that she still had her things to sort out, having been caught for briefing during the afternoon. As they approached the corner which would lead them directly to the tall Bloomsbury building in which she had been placed, she put a hand on his arm.

"Frank, you *mustn't* kiss me good night."

"Only in the nicest, most fraternal kind of way."

"No, not at all. Remember I've got to live here. Two of the girls are from my old training battalion and one of them knows me well enough to know that I've only got one brother and that he's overseas. Promise me."

"We'll compromise. If I can't kiss you fraternally in front of the A.T.S. hotel, I'll kiss you here and properly."

He pulled her into the entrance of a small shop they happened to be passing, and kissed her. She allowed him to, without resisting or responding, but her voice, when he had released her, was low in tone.

"Can I go now?"

"Yes. I'll walk you very decorously to the front door, and we can shake hands—unless you would prefer us to exchange salutes?"

She laughed, her voice returning to its normal timbre. "You idiot, Frank!"

He said, "Yes, I think the salutes might be a little on the ostentatious side."

They became lovers within a month of Patricia's posting to London. He wondered occasionally which of their desires drove the more swiftly toward that goal. Her compliance was such that he half-surmised she might really have become wanton in the fashion popularly credited to members of the women's auxiliary forces; it was a surprise to find that she had been a virgin.

Events conspired on behalf of their liaison. Where it might have broken down in the scrappiness of snatched meetings, of love-making in cramped or repellent surroundings, they found their way made smooth. An officer with whom Frank had been on good terms secured an overseas posting; he had been among the few who felt genuine guilt at having a good London job, and by making himself a nuisance had threatened to disturb the hypocritical or illusion-ridden peace of the others. He had had a small flat in Knightsbridge, and he passed it on to Frank, as the one officer of his metropolitan acquaintance whom he knew and did not despise. He had private means, and had paid the rent for some years in advance, as a way of retaining his title for ultimate repossession. His name was Verrey; he was tall, with a young pink and white complexion, spectacles, and a bushy mustache.

He said to Frank, "Should you be posted away yourself, then I rely on you either to find another quiet and reliable tenant or to return the keys to my solicitors—you've got their address. I'd prefer another tenant on the whole. I don't like to think of places being locked up and left. But there's no real reason to think you will be posted, is there?"

He glanced at Frank sideways through his spectacles in a way that Frank had come to recognize as showing tolerant scorn.

Frank smiled. "I shan't do as you've done and make a bloody nuisance of myself agitating for it, if that's what you mean. Within three months you'll be kicking yourself."

Verrey nodded. "Don't I know it. I can already picture myself picturing you strolling down Whitehall. The thing is: I en-

joy setting myself things to do, and then forcing myself to go through with them. Know what I mean?"

"I do it myself. But I pick the things to do better in the first place."

"It's a gift. You have it or you don't. Funny; I promised myself that I'd meet a few honest men overseas. A kind of reward, you understand. Now I'm beginning to wonder."

"That's another difference between us," Frank said. "I stopped wondering a long time ago."

The flat was directly under the roof of a four-story building. There was a shop at ground level; the rest of the building was approached through a side door leading to a series of staircases that arrowed upward from landing to landing. The last staircase was actually inside the flat; one climbed into the hall which gave on to two rooms, a bathroom and a very small kitchen. The decorations included some interesting reminders of the things Verrey had set himself to do: rowing and football photographic groups, a fox's brush mounted in silver, some amateurish but vivid water colors, and—in leather bindings—a library of books whose high-water marks might be said to be the complete Jorrocks and the complete de Sade. There were also, in strategic positions, photographs of three different girls; different individually but bearing a type resemblance. All three gave the appearance of being shopgirls with a tendency toward frail ethereality.

Patricia was very interested in them; she collected the three together and examined them in detail.

"I suppose he brought them here in turn. I wonder what Number Two thought, seeing Number One's face on the wall; and Number Three, seeing both her predecessors."

Frank put his arm round her waist. "Perhaps he put them away in a drawer, and brought them out again later."

"Do you think so? Is he that kind of person?"

"What kind of person?"

She laughed. "As immoral as you seem to be! One could forgive him the three if each one had been a new start, but if he had the other photographs hidden in a drawer . . . don't you see anything wrong in it?"

"There may not have been any question of loving them, or

pretending to love them. He has money; they might have been arrangements convenient for both sides."

"Well, that's immoral."

He tightened his hold on her. "Have you forgotten your early ambition to be a rich man's mistress?"

She yielded, her head falling against his shoulder. "It's you who've forgotten. Not a rich man—a famous man, a distinguished man."

"Is that different?" He pulled her hair gently. "What are you doing now—practicing?"

"Of course it's different. Practicing? I suppose there's still time—for both of us."

He said lightly: "Do you think I'm going to be distinguished, Pat?"

"I've always been certain you would be."

"Then the job's yours."

After a brief silence, she said, "We're looking too far ahead." She picked up one of the photographs. "No. They aren't the kind of girls who would make convenient arrangements. Hopeless love and suffering—although perhaps not as suffering as they looked. I think Verrey's been a cad."

"That's your trade union interest."

"A fox-hunting"—she glanced toward the book shelves—"sadistic cad. I'm sure he didn't break their hearts, but he wasn't to know he wouldn't."

"Perhaps he weighed them up as well as you have."

She shook her head positively. "He couldn't have done."

He was amused. "You take it very seriously, Pat. Are you going to prevent me from using the flat?"

"I couldn't prevent you. How could I?"

He took her arm and stroked it. "By refusing to let me make love to you here. As easily as that."

Her voice went low. "I couldn't—not anywhere. No! Let me put the trio away first. I couldn't bear to have them looking at me."

He watched her take the photographs across to the dresser that stood in the hall.

"Back to the drawer," he said. "They can console each other in the darkness."

It was not long after this that Dr. Manson died. Pat got a compassionate leave; Frank had kept a certain amount of leave in hand and was able to use it now.

After the funeral, the four of them had tea together. The house was light again; they sat in the parlor, and sunlight, falling a little short of the table, made a pool of brightness on the carpet—a pool whose edges were ragged from the constant flutter of Virginia creeper round the window.

Mrs. Manson said, "One thing to thank the war for. In peacetime we should have had to have a funeral tea if we were not to shock the neighbors. As it is, we can relax a little. Could I have another cigarette, Frank? When did you start smoking again, by the way?"

"In the Army. It was more convenient. I could give it up again quite easily."

"Yes. I'm sure you could. I'm sure you could give up anything if you wanted to."

"No. Not anything."

Mrs. Manson inhaled deeply. "I talk about relaxing but actually I'm more tensed up than ever. Being married to a doctor prepares one for the fact of death to some extent, but it doesn't help with the aftermath. It's probably a bad thing that I've been able to use you so shamelessly, Frank. If I'd been on my own I should have had to contend somehow; now I'll have to learn it all without the help of being in a state of shock."

"One feels let down," Patricia said. "I do, anyway."

Diana said surprisingly, "I feel just silly. While Daddy was—was still in the house, everything seemed all right, but now . . . shadows in the corners, all sorts of nonsense." She looked at Frank. "Why not take pity on three nervous stupid women and stay the night here? Just tonight—while we're getting used to things."

Frank's eye passed quickly over Patricia. She sat, holding her cup and saucer, and did not look up.

Mrs. Manson said, "Would you, Frank? I imagine it might help. We've come to lean on you in the last couple of days. Your mother wouldn't mind?"

He shook his head. "No. She wouldn't mind."

"There's a bed made up in Paddy's old room—that would be all right?"

"Of course. I'll pick my things up from home this evening."

Patricia looked up now. She said, "We mustn't come to lean too heavily on Frank. He has his own life to lead."

Mrs. Manson asked, "Are we imposing on you, Frank? You mustn't let us."

"I'll send in a bill, Aunt Julia," he said, "for my professional services."

She winced, and tried to prevent him seeing it.

There were still a few signs of Patrick's occupancy in the bedroom, up under the eaves on the second floor, to which he retired. There were the exercising bars which Patrick had fitted up in one corner and, in a glass case on the wall, a stuffed owl—the result of a short-lived interest in taxidermy. Opening a cupboard, Frank found a third relic: a series of boxes, neatly labeled, containing Meccano parts. The top box was open; opened accidentally, perhaps, in some spring cleaning, or deliberately, in grief, by one of the Mansons. Patrick would not have left it open; he had been slapdash in many things, but not with tools.

He switched the bedlight on before he got into bed; he had brought a book up with him to read while he waited. He had read three chapters when the door creaked open. Patricia stood there, her dressing gown tightly wrapped about her.

She shivered. "I'm cold!"

He said, "Come and get warm, love."

She snuggled against him in the bed. She said, "I was scared—coming up the stairs. The house was so quiet, and I hadn't dared put a light on. I saw the light under your door and simply pelted along the landing toward it."

"That's what I'm here for; so that the irrational fears of the night won't get the upper hand."

She kissed him. "Don't be ironical. You do it so well it gives me the shivers."

"Even more than creeping upstairs in the night?"

"As much. Darling, I'm so glad you're here. Dear Dil!"

It startled him. "You don't mean that she suggested my staying here for our benefit—with this in mind?"

"I think so."

"But have you told her anything?"

"No, of course not. But I'm sure she's guessed. I should have done if it were her."

"I can't imagine Di creeping upstairs to a lover under any circumstances. I can't imagine her really approving of anyone else doing it either. Certainly not of engineering it."

"Di's moral code is more complicated than you think. It has priorities. She saw four people rather miserable and thought that two of them might easily be happy."

"But would she think it a good thing to be happy in the wrong way?"

"She would only think of the being happy."

He was outside again, outside the circle of understanding, of motives shared or intuitively known. He felt the same hurt and bitterness, and the same automatic reaction of his mind against it. He tightened his hold on Patricia as she lay, unmoving, in his arms. Over the light auburn sheaf of her hair, he looked at the stuffed owl on the wall, and at the exercising bars. In Patrick's room, in Patrick's bed, with Patricia warm in his arms. He reached up and clicked the light off.

During the summer there was word that John was coming back to England. Patricia brought the news along to the flat one evening; she had had a letter from her mother. Frank was lying stretched along the window seat, and did not get up when he heard her letting herself in and then climbing the staircase into the hall. She called to him and he answered, "In here."

She bent down to kiss him, and kneaded his chest with her hands. Then she sat down on the floor and let her head lie back against his ribs.

"Darling, you continually get more idle. I've had a letter from Mummy; she says John's coming home. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Excellent. But I wonder how he's managed it; most people are going to the Middle East these days rather than from it. Has he been wounded?"

"I'm pretty sure not. He would have said something to warn her if so. You know Mummy's letters are not the most explicit in the world, but I gather that he's left the regiment and been posted to something with the initials S.A.S. They leave Mummy blank, and I haven't come across them in my varied and adventurous career. Something to do with South Africa? Of course, she might have copied it down wrongly."

Frank did not answer at once. Patricia craned her neck to look up at him.

"Do you know what it might be?"

"Yes. I think she's copied it correctly. There's a new thing called Special Air Service. I imagine that's it."

She waited for a few seconds. "Well? What kind of job is he likely to be doing?"

"I'll check, but I think it's still under Official Secrets. Like your mysterious wireless work. If it is, I can't tell you anything about it—any more than you can tell me about Karno."

"But this is John!"

"Ask him when he comes back, then."

She got up and leaned on him. "Tell me. I insist!" He pretended to be winded, and she rose from him in indignation. "I'm not that heavy. You swine, Frank!"

"Even now that I've got my breath back, my lips are still sealed. You could never love a man who betrayed his country because he was sat on by a descendant of one of Rubens's models."

"No, but be serious. Tell me at least—is it a nasty kind of job?"

"It depends what you call nasty. I have a feeling it's the sort of thing where you have a prolonged diet of cakes and ale, and every now and then get presented with a fairly heavy bill. But that's only guesswork, really."

She nodded. "I think I see. It's the sort of thing John would like."

He turned his head to look at her. "The bills could be very steep, you know."

She said confidently, "John will be all right. He's always at his best in a situation where plenty of nerve is required. It's safer for him, too, to have stiff things every now and then."

“Safer?”

“Safer than being in the infantry. I should think you need more luck than skill in the infantry.”

“And doesn’t he have luck?”

“I suppose he has had so far, but I suppose luck gives out in the end. It can’t go on forever.”

“Nor can skill.”

“I’d back John’s a long way. As long as this war can last.”

Frank got up and went across to the sideboard. “A very fine sisterly tribute. Let’s have a drink on it. A toast to John whose skill will very probably last out the next century or so.”

She took the glass he offered her. “Cynical once more. I don’t mind. It will be nice to see him again, won’t it?”

“Very nice.” He raised his own glass. “To John.”

She giggled. “To John.” The giggle was replaced by an expression of surprise. She looked at Frank sharply. “Something you said a little while ago . . . I never told you anything about Karno.”

He smiled at her. “Didn’t you?”

“Good God! So you know what I’m doing. How? Where did you find out?”

He drained the whisky, and refilled his glass. “That comes under Official Secrets, too.”

When he recognized Lucus, walking in front of him down the Strand, Frank could not at first decide whether to speak to him or not. He walked behind him for more than fifty yards, watching the familiar tubby figure with its characteristic slight lurch. He did not decide until Lucus crossed the road opposite Southampton Street. Lucus was halted for a little while by the eastward stream of traffic, when he was halfway across. Frank came abreast of him and tapped him on the shoulder.

Frank asked: “Going anywhere in a great hurry, Bill?”

Lucus hesitated. “No. Not particularly.”

“In that case, you might as well come and have a drink.”

The pub they went into was fairly crowded with uniformed figures, but they were able to squeeze into a corner of the bar as two naval officers came away. Frank ordered pints of bitter for

them both. He said to Lucus, "I haven't seen you since Paddy was killed. It seems a long time ago now."

He had chosen his words deliberately, and he watched Lucus to see how they reacted on him. Lucus's eyes flickered slightly, but the muscles of his face remained under control. He lifted his glass. "Good health." He drank from it, and put it down again.

"Three and a half years. Is it a long time? I suppose it is. It will be to you, anyway."

Frank said, "You took over the A.C. place here in London?"

"I wasn't very polite to my old friends, was I? I didn't write to anyone—not even Oliver."

"He's dead. Died a few months ago."

"I'm sorry." He smiled. "But I wouldn't want to fool you into thinking it means very much. I've had a funny kind of life, Frank. Until I was middle-aged I didn't think that I could feel anything about any other human being. Then . . . two or three years, followed by a kind of earthquake. And now it's all gone again, all dried up. Except that there's a tender spot left that I try not to irritate."

He stared at Frank out of his mild round face.

"I didn't take over the Great West Road place. I went there as a supernumerary—to do any kind of odd job that they might think wanted doing. I thought of leaving the country—going to the States or Canada. But it would have needed more initiative than I had just then. All I wanted to do was to live through the earthquake as best I could. I managed it—there's just the tender spot I mentioned." He paused. "I very nearly invented a reason for not coming in here with you. I would have, no more than a year ago."

Frank said, "For that matter, I thought very seriously before I decided to tap you on the shoulder."

Lucus nodded. "That's what comes of being self-centered. It hadn't occurred to me to remember that you and Paddy knew each other for a good deal longer than I knew him. Probably that's why I had such a bad time over it. If you get to forty without ties, you're not normal. Any ties you do make then you think of as exclusive."

Frank said, "Pat's stationed in London too, you know."

"Stationed? She's in the women's forces, I take it. It's an odd thing. You and she were the two people I just couldn't bear the thought of seeing. For different reasons, of course. I still don't think I should like to have much to do with Pat again. The physical likeness would be too close."

"London's a big place. You don't need to see any of us if you don't want to."

Lucus said slowly, "No . . . I'm glad I ran into you, Frank. I didn't want to see Pat because she was Paddy's twin; and I can't see any point now in exposing myself to that kind of physical recollection. But with you, it was different. I resented you. Somehow I managed to blame you. It was ridiculous, of course, but these things often are, I imagine. I persuaded myself that you had led Paddy into that pipe-climbing business and then dropped out while he carried on to kill himself." He looked at Frank. "I was wrong, wasn't I?"

"It was Paddy who was fascinated by the idea of it from the beginning. I think Pat pointed it out to him, when they all came over one afternoon."

"Of course. It's obvious enough. It's the kind of thing that would fascinate him. Frank. What exactly do you think happened that night?"

"I think his nerve probably failed him."

Lucus drained his glass. He pushed his and Frank's over the counter to be refilled.

"I didn't want to believe it, but I knew all the time. A life like that ending in fear. The night it happened—I woke up in a cold sweat. To end like that . . . you can keep all your Gods and Saviors."

"Amen," Frank said.

Colonel Druce-Ruck was not very intelligent. He was aware of this, and his attitude toward intelligence in others was markedly ambivalent; he reserved for intelligent people both his greatest detestation and his highest devotion. The decision as to which side came into play was made in the obscurity of his emotions, and, once made, was apparently incapable of alteration.

Frank's success with him had been immediate; so much so

that there was an increasing tendency for Druce-Ruck to seek advice from Frank rather than from his nominal deputy, Major Stone. Stone, fortunately, was amiable and unambitious; he had spent the twenty-one years following 1918 in mild regrets and was happy enough to be back in uniform. He would take the messages from Druce-Ruck that called Frank into Druce-Ruck's office, and pass them on in no other spirit than that of apology for interfering with his subordinate's work.

Called in one morning, Frank saluted with the punctilio-
ness he always adopted toward the Colonel. Druce-Ruck nodded
cheerfully.

"Sit down, Frank. Have a fag?"

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, you've got your third. Backdated to June."

Frank smiled. "Thanks. It's very welcome."

"More work, probably. You're getting another officer. Straight from O.C.T.U. again but I think it'll be a better type. I've put some pressure on Inwood. I told him if I didn't like the looks of this one, he'd go straight back. Now, I want to have a word with you about Smethers."

"He'll be getting his second, I take it."

"Yes. You take it correctly."

"He'll be very pleased."

"It occurred to me," Druce-Ruck said, "that this might be a favorable opportunity for posting him away. Quite frankly, the fellow makes me uneasy. I could arrange for it to be done with all due delicacy. What do you think?"

Frank examined his half-smoked cigarette. The question of Smethers himself was a minor one; he found him generally useful and did not fear competition from him. The important question revolved about Colonel Druce-Ruck. It was not that there was any possibility of damaging himself in the Colonel's eyes, but there was, he thought, a chance of improving his already high status.

He said thoughtfully, "Since you're asking me, sir, I think I should prefer to keep him. He's a conscientious and hard-working officer, and he knows the job very well by now. We might always land a dud in his place. I think we ought to put up with his . . . his shortcomings in personality."

"Yes, I suppose there is that side to it. His work is all right. Frankly, I don't like him. But then, I don't have to see a great deal of him. It was you I was thinking of from that point of view."

Frank grinned. "I'm used to him."

"I never could get used to him," Druce-Ruck said positively. "That little snout of his—and he's always hunched up and looking up at you." He imitated a characteristic pose of Smethers's. "I'm always expecting him to come tale-carrying about something or other. I remember a little rat at Malvern who had just that look. In fact, I've been hoping he would do something like that so that I could have a go at him. Well, you're sure you want to keep him?"

"I think so. I'd rather not run any risk of the work being thrown out of gear. Of course, if you feel so very strongly about him . . ."

"What I feel isn't the point. This is the Army. You can run along now, Frank; and perhaps you would tell him he can put his second up. The less I see him, the better."

Frank said to Smethers, "We'll have to see about having another desk put in. We're getting another helper. Promotion all round—you can take your tunic along to the tailor straightaway."

Smethers said, in his curiously thin voice, "All round? You've got your third too? Congratulations. Oh, there was a call for you." He pushed a slip of paper over. "She left the number for you to ring."

"Oh, Pat? Thanks."

Smethers bent again to his work as Frank put the call through. While he waited for the connection, Frank studied Smethers's head: earnest, engrossed, treacherous and essentially ineffective. He was, he reflected, precisely the kind of companion he would have chosen in this particular environment.

He knew what the object of Patricia's telephone call would be. A month previously, the newly formed Special Air Service had been added to the list of regimental oddments whose movements were controlled by his department, and it was some days now since he had seen the movement order posting Captain Manson back to England for training. He had not said anything to Patricia of this. But his reticence had been due to no con-

cern for official secrecy. He did not know from what it derived; it was simply that in an obscure way it pleased him to think that, even with Patricia, he could withhold information with no other object in view than the withholding.

Patricia said, "John's in London! He wants us both to have lunch with him; he's not going up to Liverpool until this afternoon. Can you make it?"

"Yes, of course. Where and when?"

"We'll pick you up at your place, around twelve-thirty. Will that be all right?"

"That will be fine."

He met them downstairs in the lobby. He saw them from the stairs, standing together near the door. Patricia was talking animatedly and John, with a smile of tolerance, was listening. He walked more slowly down to join them.

Patricia said, "Here he is. We were just commenting on your palatial surroundings, Frank."

"You should see my office," he said. "It has ashtrays and a strip of carpet. Well, John. You're looking well."

He put his hand out, and John gripped it with a familiar strength of fingers. He had changed only in the direction of fulfillment of the old promises—of handsomeness, of strength, of assurance and command. For a moment he shared Patricia's confidence that no artifice of war could beat this sureness down.

John said, "So are you. I came back to share the privations of starving England, but you both look reasonably fit on them."

Over lunch, John said, "My first civilized meal in England. I've been looking forward to it."

Frank said, "I'm told Cairo does this sort of thing much better."

"So I believe," John said. "I didn't see a lot of Cairo, though."

"Have you been told where to report to from leave?"

"A place in Kent. Easy reach of London." He grinned benevolently. "I shall be able to drop in and keep an eye on you both."

Frank said, "We're not as easily watched as we used to be. We've both been running wild."

"That doesn't matter. You can always pick up threads."

"Like old times," Patricia said. "We must be careful not to get too sentimental about things."

"Frank will prevent us doing that. That's his secret: complete absence of sentiment. Isn't it, Frank?"

"One of my secrets. I have more than one."

John laughed. "Yes, I suppose you have."

With regard to Lucus and Patricia, he was leading a curious kind of double life. He had not told Patricia of having met Lucus again, nor of the fact that he was continuing to see him at fairly regular intervals. With Lucus he was more frank; he explained that a lot of his time was spent with Patricia, and Lucus was ready enough to adapt himself to this situation. It was tacitly agreed that Frank should telephone Lucus whenever he had an evening or a week-end afternoon free; Lucus himself had no ties which could intervene.

Patricia went on leave only a couple of weeks after John's return; John was still on leave himself at the time. It was during this time that Lucus invited Frank to an A.C. function.

He explained: "It's the jubilee—war or no war, we're going to celebrate fifty years of Amalgamated Cables. It's only been Amalgamated Cables since 1920, but there's a continuity of bookkeeping. I have to go, of course. I thought you might find it amusing to come along as well. The dinner will probably be pretty bad, but there should be a good deal of drink about. Soaking up the war profits."

"I've no objection to helping," Frank said. "Where are they holding it?"

"At the Metro. I'll pick you up and we'll go along together, if that suits you."

In the meanwhile he had a letter from Patricia. Diana had managed to get a few days away from the hospital to join them, so that what was left of the Manson family was reunited at Long View. They were not doing very much except laze in the sun, she said. The atmosphere was one of peace and gentle melancholy—Daddy and Patrick were missed, but missed without pain. He was missed, too, she wrote. It was a pity he could not have managed a leave at the same time as well. Was there a possibility of him getting up for the week end?

He wrote back briefly to say that he could not manage it. There was too much work on hand; he could not possibly get the Saturday morning off.

Cocktails were at six. Frank and Lucus arrived about fifteen minutes later. They were directed to the Swallow Room and found it already well crowded with representatives of Amalgamated Cables and those guests who had been invited to join in the jubilee celebrations.

Having tried the sherry and found it appalling, they had gone on to the whisky which was at least of an average standard. Frank signaled to a waiter, who came and replaced their glasses with full ones.

Frank said, "All the full might of Amalgamated Cables on display. It's a very impressive sight, Bill."

"Even without the war, A.C. was doing very nicely. The chairman of the board is Joshua Yennet. He'll be presiding tonight, of course. There's never been an unconsidered trifle that he's failed to snap up, and he's like a steam shovel on grabbing anything really big. Just now he's grabbing in every direction. At the beginning of the war we were the third biggest producer in our field; we're a good way out in front now. That's a big change in only two years."

"I see new extensions every time I go back to Holly Ash," Frank said.

Lucus rummaged for cigarettes. "Ever thought of what you're going to do after the war?"

"No. There seems to be plenty of time." He looked at Lucus, smiling. "Except in a negative sense. I'm pretty sure I'm not going to be a schoolmaster."

Lucus said seriously, "No. I can't see you schoolmastering. What about this lot? Does it interest you?"

He had gestured toward the mass of people, circulating slowly, talking and drinking more swiftly. Frank said, "No qualifications. You know that. With Paddy it was different."

"Different altogether. I wanted to have Paddy doing my kind of thing. By the way, that's Joshua who's just come in."

Frank followed the direction of Lucus's glance.

"And the girl?"

"His daughter. She runs his social life for him. The mother died when she was little."

"She's very good-looking."

"Yes. No, Frank, the point is this: I wasn't thinking of your coming in on the technical side. In any case, I'm not sure it's the best side to be on any longer. The firm's got so big that it's practically all administration and finance. They can always hire people to produce the actual commodity. If you got a foothold in the H.Q. here in London, you could have a very bright future. You might think about it. I could probably get you in if you were interested."

"Thanks, Bill. There's plenty of time yet, of course." He glanced at him. "It isn't a terribly good idea to make big plans a long way in advance. Is it?"

Lucus said slowly, "Paddy was a different matter. Those plans . . . I was asking for trouble."

Frank nodded. "I see the difference."

Lucus put a hand on his shoulder. "I never cared for you much in the old days, Frank. You know how it was—Paddy and the rest, but some of the rest had claims on Paddy, and I couldn't be expected to like that. Well, I see I was wrong now. If I can lend you a hand in any way, I'll be happy enough to do it. I've got a fair amount of unused influence to my credit—there hasn't been anyone to use it for. It's not the same as it would have been for Paddy, but you wouldn't expect it to be. It could be just as useful."

"Don't worry. I understand, all right. I'm very grateful, Bill, and I may take you up on it someday."

Lucus said, "I'm going across to have a word with Yennet now. Above a certain rank in the organization it's etiquette to go over and greet him on this kind of occasion. If you feel like coming across with me, I could introduce you. It wouldn't do any harm, and then we could follow it up afterward if you felt inclined."

"No, I don't think I will. You go, Bill. I'll find you again later."

One of Lucus's rare appraising looks emerged incongruously from his mild round face. "You're not bothered by the idea of meeting a man like that? No, of course not."

Frank smiled. "I'll go and flirt with one of the Civil Servants' wives. You go and pay your respects."

Yennet had become separated from the girl whom Lucus had identified as his daughter. Yennet was holding informal court at a small table under the main windows; the girl was in conversation with an efficient-looking man of young middle-age some distance away.

Lucus had identified several people as belonging to the A.C. London headquarters; Frank accosted one of them.

"I wonder if you could tell me who that is in conversation with Miss Yennet?"

"With Miss Yennet? Mr. Parker, one of the directors."

"Thank you very much."

He went over to where the couple stood, and excused himself for the interruption. "It is Mr. Parker, isn't it? I was asked to bring you a message. You are wanted in the lobby. They didn't have a page handy, so they called in the Army."

Parker said, "Oh, really? They didn't say what . . . ? Thank you very much. Excuse me, Helen. I'd better go along and see what it is."

Frank stood beside Helen and watched Parker disappear into the crowd, in the direction of the door.

"I should think," he said, "that it will take him ten minutes at least to make absolutely sure that nobody wants him after all. He's the kind who would make absolutely sure, isn't he?"

She looked at him; young, sophisticated, and soft beneath the sophistication. He wondered how she was going to react, and elaborated his different plans.

She gave him a cool thoughtful smile. "Yes, he's that kind. A quarter of an hour, probably; he'd find it hard to believe someone could have been taking his name in vain. It's utterly brilliant of you. I suppose you had a reason for it. It wasn't just a military joke?"

"No. A tactical maneuver. I hoped to get the undivided pleasure of your company, for either ten minutes or a quarter of an hour."

She was watchful, still smiling. "Why?"

"Will one adequate reason be enough for you?" She nodded. "Because you are outstandingly the most attractive woman I've

seen here. Perhaps I shouldn't spoil it by adding that the others make up a pretty poor bunch."

She said gravely, "Perhaps you shouldn't. How dreadful! Is the Army so desperate for female company that they have to go in for this kind of thing? The other people I know in the Army don't give that impression."

"The other people you know in the Army know you already."

"That was very, very clever, Captain——?"

"Bates. Frank Bates. I don't know whether my Christian name has anything to do with it, but I have odd fits of honesty. I also wanted to meet you because of the position of influence you hold in this great organization. The war can't go on forever to keep me in idleness."

The smile left her lips. "Position of influence?"

"As the chairman's secretary. You are his secretary, aren't you?"

She looked at him steadily. The smile began to creep back, just raising the corners of her bright painted mouth.

"Who told you? Who gave me away?"

"Simple deduction. I saw you come in with him, and I know he's not married. You had an air that was proprietary without being possessive, so you couldn't be his mistress. Well? If I call round from the Labour Exchange after the Army has thrown me out, will you get me a job as an office boy?"

"I may not be with A.C. still. I may have got the sack before then."

"Be married, more probably. That's a sad thought. Unless you were to marry Mr. Yennet—secretaries often do, don't they? That would be better still, from my point of view."

She laughed; a high brittle laugh made pleasant by the charm of her features. "You've stumbled on my secret ambition, Captain! You really are frightfully clever. If I succeed, you can have the job—I promise you that. Will that do?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Other considerations are beginning to occur to me. What about having dinner with me some time? Tomorrow? Monday?"

She said, "I stay at home on Sundays and look after my invalid mother. Monday might be possible."

"If it might be possible, it is."

She smiled. "It is, then. Thank you, Captain."

"Frank. After all, we've shared our ambitions, haven't we? Do you realize I still don't know your name, except that it's Helen? I'll call you Helen, of course, but it would be nice to be able to introduce you formally, should it be necessary."

She said, mock-seriously, "Of course, it's going to be Helen Yennet one day."

He grinned. "Perhaps. But I'd better know what it is now. I couldn't very well introduce you the other way."

"Helen Hoskins," she said. "Plain Helen Hoskins."

"Hoskins and Bates—two simple straightforward names. Now about Monday, Helen—shall we come back here, without the crowd? Seven do you?"

"Mm. I can manage that."

He took her thin white hand between his own. "In that case, I'll see you then. Now I'd better slip away before Mr. Parker returns, breathing indignation."

"How did you know his name, anyway?"

He pointed to his informant. "I asked that little man."

"How terribly resourceful! But if you do slip away, Mr. Parker will hunt you down. He'll want to know all the details."

"He won't find me. I'm not staying for the dinner."

"Aren't you? I'll protect you from him, if you like."

Frank's eye went to where Lucus, with his back to them, was in conversation with Yennet. "I couldn't stay in any case, I'm afraid. For other reasons."

"What a pity! Then it will have to be Monday." She smiled. "Au rev', Frank."

Patricia was due back from leave the day before John's leave expired, but when Frank met her at the station he found John had traveled down with her. She kissed him eagerly, making it reasonably clear that there was going to be no attempt to hide the fact of their relationship from John. She made it explicit with some of the first words she spoke.

"We thought it would be silly to make separate journeys at a twenty-four hour interval, and so I thought John might as well come down with me and spend the night at the flat. Then we could all go and drink ourselves silly together tonight. I

need something like that. A.T.S. women are bad enough at any time, but when you're just back from leave they play on your nerves like yowling tomcats."

"Tomcats?" John asked. "You mean they chase you? Of course, we've heard some queer tales about the women's forces . . ."

"No, you fool! But it's the tomcats that yowl, isn't it? It's the yowling I was thinking about. 'Did you hear what happened to Ada? Meet any nice men on leave—after all, in Liverpool, the naval types? Oh, I must tell you the latest about Cathy. . . .' If I've had enough to drink I shan't mind, and if I have a hang-over in the morning it will give me the guts to kick them out of the way."

Frank said, "Is John going to bring all his gear over, or dump it somewhere for the night? Where does he leave from to-morrow—Victoria?"

"Yes, Victoria," John said. "I'll bring it with me, I think. There isn't all that much."

"It'll have to be lugged up four flights of stairs."

"So Pat told me. Still, with two strong men and a strong young woman, we should manage all right."

John saw to the taxi and organized the transportation in general, arranging for Patricia's bags to be dropped at the A.T.S. hotel and dividing his own among the three of them when the taxi had been paid off outside the flat. He came last himself, and nodded in appreciation when they were finally inside the flat.

"A very snug billet. You've been lucky, dropping on this, Frank."

Patricia said, "I'll go and exercise my womanly functions in knocking some kind of meal up—we brought rations with us. Simpler than going out again, and John and I are both ravenous."

John examined the bookshelves with some care, and came back to sit down in the easy chair facing Frank's with a book in his hand.

"I used to read a copy of this when we were up the blue. The fellow it belonged to got himself written off with kit in some

peculiar fashion, so I never finished it. What do you think of it?"

He showed Frank the book: *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

"Since you ask," Frank said, "a very nasty kind of fake. The big boy, the leader of men, quietening his conscience with a lot of fine words. Essentially, wind and piss."

John grinned. "I'm not sure I don't agree with you." He paused, and looked at Frank curiously. "Though I wouldn't be likely to say it as emphatically as you do. You never used to show your feelings like that."

"I don't as a rule," Frank said. He was, in fact, angry with himself for having spoken—as he knew he had done—with bitterness. He forced a smile. "I must be off color."

"It's the high-paced Whitehall life that does it," John said. He turned to the book. "You should come down from the Staff and vegetate with the rest of us."

After their meal he had a few minutes alone with Patricia while John was in the bathroom. She came quickly and put her hands on his shoulders, stroking away from his neck.

"Love, try not to be too terribly fed up."

He said flatly, "I must be making it very obvious."

"No, not obvious, but I can tell. About John being here . . . it wouldn't have been any good, anyway."

He saw what she meant. "Would it be crudely unflattering to say the thought never entered my head?"

She bent down, rubbing her cheek against his face. "What is it, then? Tell me what it is."

He overcame a reluctance. "John seems to think we're still at Holly Ash. And still children."

"Don't be silly, love. John's just John. I'm the one who should be irritated, if anyone. I always used to be. You know he doesn't mean anything when he tells people to do things. He always has done."

"He takes things for granted too. Or did you invite him to use this place as a pied à terre whenever he came up to London?"

This time there was surprise in her voice. "I didn't need to, did I? Among the citizens, property was always held in common as far as possible. Do you really not want him to come here?"

He was silent for a moment. Distantly John's voice was audible, singing a ballad in his fine clear baritone. It had been foolish, he realized, to say anything. He put his own hands up and caught Patricia's.

"Of course not. I'm just in a mood, for some reason."

"But you don't have moods."

He laughed. "John's probably right. He suggested I should give up my desk and join the fighting men."

"But not seriously. Of course you mustn't. It's John's kind of thing, not yours."

He pulled her hands, dragging her forward over his back and neck. His head was cushioned in her softness and warmth.

"Then in that case you must have been right. Just ordinary frustration—nothing more."

She laughed softly against his ear and then swiftly tugged herself free. In a glass on the opposite wall he saw her smoothing down her frock.

"John's coming," she said.

"Let not poor Nellie starve," Frank said.

On their second date they had had tea together and gone then to feed the swans in Regent's Park. With this purpose in view, Helen had secreted one of the sad-looking buns with which they had been served, in her handbag. There were two swans which she had christened Billy and Nellie, and Billy was securing most of the bounty.

Helen laughed, and touched his arm impulsively.

"You idiot, Frank! Oh, isn't it too utterly wonderful, this afternoon?"

The sky was blue, and the air warm with the scents of summer.

"Very pleasant." He glanced around at the park's expanse. "All the joys of nature, not forgetting the illicit ones."

She followed his gaze to the various couples silently and desperately intertwined on the grass. After a pause, she said, "One of the girls in the office—her name's Susan—used to come here with a Canadian airman. Then she found he was married with five children."

"Bad luck for Susan," he said. "It may teach her to be a little more careful in the way she exercises her natural urges."

"But she became pregnant!"

"Then that should sharpen the lesson."

She turned to look at him searchingly. Susan, he guessed, was part of the imaginary background of office life that she created for his benefit. He took it as seriously as if it were real.

She said, "That's a frightfully harsh thing to say."

He laughed. "The male viewpoint?"

"No. More, I think. I think there's a hardness in you."

"And what about you? The successful private secretary who plans to marry her boss."

"It's not the same. There is a hardness—a special hardness."

He looked at her, smiling slightly. "Are you quite sure it doesn't appeal to you somewhat?"

She flushed. "And that's a beastly thing to say."

"But is it true?"

For a moment she stared, in trembling anger. "Please go away," she said. "I don't want to stay with you."

He said softly, "Then it is true."

She turned on her heel and walked over the bridge, away from him. Halfway across, she found she still had part of the bun in her hand, and threw it into the water without looking back.

Frank watched her go. The path led to a park exit, but it also could take one round in a circle to reach this bridge again. He lit a cigarette and leaned back against the stonework of the bridge.

When, a quarter of an hour later, she reappeared from the opposite direction, she saw him standing there. She hesitated, as though debating whether she should strike away from the path across the grass. But in the end she came toward him.

As she walked by, he called quietly, "Helen!"

She hesitated again and then turned to face him.

"If anything I said hurt you, I'm sorry. Do you believe that?"

She said, "I don't know. Why did you say it?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes one says the wrong things. Was it very nice of you to credit me with what you called a special hardness?"

She looked up to him wonderingly. Her defenselessness fascinated him—through having money, security, comfort, from the very beginning? Yet her father had had those things and they had not softened him.

She said at last: "I suppose it wasn't. I know I'm not terribly good at reading characters. Frank—I'm sorry if I hurt you too."

He took her arm and tucked it in his own.

"All forgiven, then? We've all been pining for you. Especially Nellie."

Her smile was still hesitant. "I wondered . . . I thought you might come after me."

His eyes found hers, intent, and this time honest.

"You'll never know how hard it was not to."

During the succeeding months they saw John fairly often. The training, as far as could be gathered from remarks he let fall, was severe but flexible, and most week ends saw him at the flat. Although he did not mention it directly, he took account of the relationship between Patricia and Frank by frequently going off on his own. When he had been in the flat, he punctiliously left notes, advising them of his intentions. "Back at eleven P.M. approx. Don't bother to mix cocoa." Patricia found them amusing, and Frank affected to do the same.

One Saturday he invited them both to meet him in Kent, giving them a village railway station as the place where he would pick them up. He actually turned up himself in an Army Humber Snipe, which he parked at a local inn; it was clear that he was known there. Then he led them off on a walk through rolling wooded country.

The year had turned toward winter. Tractors were plowing up the stubble of the empty harvest fields, and crows were raucously high and distant in the sharp and empty acres of a steel-blue sky. On the crest of a hill, John pointed down through a scatter of trees to another village, about three or four miles away.

"Recognize anything, Pat?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. Wait, though. Can it be Lecker—where we used to live before London?"

"Yes. There's the church. Our house was just the other side of it."

She said, "I don't really recognize it. I was just guessing it must be that. You've been there, lately?"

"Two or three times. Do you feel like going down?"

She said, "No," decisively. "Unless you want to again. I'd rather leave it."

"I've said good-by to it myself," John said.

They were all three in khaki. Around them was the muddy brown of the plowed fields, the yellow and black of the late-autumn trees, the tired green of winter pasture.

"Said good-by," Frank echoed. "Been reading again?"

John laughed. "The cynic!" He put his arms round their shoulders; a link, or the apex of a triangle. "Then we can be getting back. We'll have tea, and I'll put you on your train."

Patricia said in surprise, "We aren't making an evening of it? I thought we were going to be introduced to the high life of rural boozers."

They had turned to retrace their path down the hill.

John said, "You can stay if you particularly want to play shove-ha'penny in bar parlors. I've got to be back at eighteen hundred."

Frank stumbled slightly over a rut in the ground, and felt John's hand immediately on his arm, checking and supporting him. He said, "I thought you gay cavaliers didn't do any duties."

"No, it's not duties. We're on a movement order. The happy training days are over. I presume they are going to find the odd job for us to justify our pay."

Patricia said, with alarm openly in her voice, "Where are you going?"

"Well, we haven't been told. Don't worry, Pat—it's not a forced landing on Berchtesgaden; not this week end, anyway."

She smiled. "No, of course not. But you'll probably land up in Scotland or South Wales. It's a damn nuisance. It was such fun all three of us being close together."

"Can't be helped," John said. "One thing—you'll be able to get on with your courting in peace."

It was the first direct reference he had made to that. To

Frank, it had the unctuous force of good wishes in the vestry. Patricia laughed.

"We manage," she said. "We manage well enough."

Rather more than a week later, Frank was in his office in the middle of the afternoon. He had been busy in completing the arrangements for a Middle East draft, and the cup of tea that the A.T.S. corporal from the typists' pool had brought up had been allowed to grow cold and scummed. Smethers, equally busy at the other desk, had managed to find time to drink his; he had a great thirst for tea. Their new helper was on leave.

He finished the Middle East job eventually, and rang for the corporal to take it out. That left him with only routine work on hand; he relaxed in his chair and lit a cigarette. Smethers was still head down and painfully absorbed in the problems of integrating a R.E.M.E. unit with the Royal Marines.

Major Stone's room adjoined theirs; Stone came through it as the A.T.S. corporal was leaving by the other door. He was carrying a file in his left hand.

Frank tipped his cigarette ash neatly into the metal waste tin. He continued to lie back in his chair. He waved Stone away as he approached his desk.

"Not now. Not even if it's routing Timoshenko's army through Scotland."

"Won't take you five minutes."

"I've heard that before."

"Genuine, this time. Interesting little job, too. A small matter of judicial murder."

"Not our usual line, is it? Not quite so openly, anyway."

Stone dropped the file on Frank's desk. "It isn't put like that here, but the rumor's drifted down with the file. It's a parachuting job. They're ninety-nine per cent certain the other end has gone up in smoke, but it's one of those things that have to be tried. It's just possible it hasn't—and if it has, we've got to know about it."

Frank pointed to the file. "How many?"

"Only two, thank God. Quite enough. Send it straight through to G2, will you? And treat it with care. It's the only copy. Someone will have to tell those people about the wonder-

ful invention known as carbon paper some day. I've got to go across and see Tony now. You can look after things, can't you?"

Frank nodded. "If I have to."

He finished smoking his cigarette before he opened the file. There would be two names there. He wondered what the odds were; impossible to estimate without more information about the number of people doing jobs of this kind, but they could not be high.

Smethers straightened up, sighed heavily, and then slumped forward again over his work. Frank sat upright. He took a corner of the file, and flicked it open. There were four names, not two. He might have expected that: two officers detailed, two named in reserve.

He looked at them steadily for some moments, before he picked up his pen.

6

Dinner was over by eight. It was the prospect of the remainder of the evening alone with the Cartwrights that prompted Bates to suggest going to the Gala Ball. Cartwright was not enthusiastic, but was forced to yield to the determination of his guest. Milly, with obvious relief, switched on the television set as the two men prepared to leave the house.

The ball was being held in the clubhouse, a long low wooden building with an arched roof. There was a bar at one end, and a raised platform—just now fully occupied by a six-piece band—at the other. Along one side there were groups of tables and chairs; the rest of the floor had been cleared for dancing. The walls were studded with photographs of A.C. football and cricket teams, going back nearly twenty years. As Cartwright and Bates came in, a two-step was just finishing. The floor emptied. Cartwright pushed through to the bar.
"What are you drinking?" he called back.

“Bitter.”

Cartwright brought two pint glasses over; they held them with some difficulty in the press of people. The muttered “Evening, Mr. Cartwright” was continually repeated. Cartwright, for all his reluctance to come, gave every sign of enjoying the deferential greetings that surrounded him. Some of the men made room for them to put their glasses on a projecting ledge. Cartwright drained more than half of his before he put it down.

A waltz was struck up, and the crush eased to some extent as couples moved back onto the dance floor. Cartwright said, “Good band. They’re about the best-known small band in Liverpool. I can’t stand listening to a poor band.”

Bates was conscious of the lush rhythms, but with no particular interest or pleasure. He let his gaze roam over the crowd—the dancers and the drinkers. He supposed that automatically he was looking for familiar faces, but it was not surprising that he found none. He saw that Cartwright had finished his beer, and so drank his own and ordered two more.

At the end of that number, the band leader came to the microphone. His voice boomed through the stuffy crowded room in broad Liverpool-American.

“Ladies and gentlemen. The band is now going to have a rest. And while we’re wetting our whistles, you will be entertained by your old favorites, Joe Peek and Betty.”

There was a good deal of applause, and some indistinguishable shouted remarks.

“I’ve seen them,” Cartwright said. “They’re good. You want to watch this.”

The band had left the stage, but someone else had taken over the piano. A mountainous woman climbed, surprisingly lightly, up the side of the platform. She was followed by a very small man. She stood quite motionless in the center of the stage; she was wearing a brilliant scarlet dress with a blown white rose in the cleft of her improbably large breasts. The pianist began to play “One of These Days,” and as he did so the little man began stalking round his partner.

He sang the song in a high tenor voice, punctuating it with gestures hardly short of obscene and with unexpected rushes to some or other salient point of her vast spreading flesh. She

simply stood there, rolling her eyes and occasionally turning her head with stately grace to keep him in view. The crowd began laughing from the first move, and laughed more deeply and helplessly as the ritual continued. Cartwright was quite overcome by it.

"One of these day-ay-ays," the little man crooked, "you're gonna be so lo-onely!"

In the great gale of laughter, blowing still louder, Bates saw her face. She was standing by the wall, under the picture marked "A.C. First XI, 1938," and she was laughing with the others. She could not have seen him.

He nudged Cartwright, and said into his ear, "I've just seen someone I know. I'll see you later."

Cartwright nodded, still laughing. Bates pushed his way as unobtrusively as possible through the crush, and finally made his way to her side. The laughter died from her face, to be replaced by a smile that was friendly, and yet timid.

He said, "Hello, Di. I never expected to see you here."

"I haven't been here long. I saw you this afternoon, at the prize-giving. It's years, isn't it, Frank? You're looking well."

"You saw me this afternoon? Why didn't you come and speak to me?"

She looked doubtful. "There didn't really seem to be a chance. You were very busy, and you were with Mr. Cartwright. I didn't think you would want to be bothered."

"Bothered! What an idea to have."

She looked so much older than her real age; her features had been drawn in fatigue and pain. He could understand that she might have been in the crowd at the prize-giving without his recognizing her; perhaps if she had not been laughing he would not have known her now. She wore a cheap print dress, and worn-down shoes. Standing beside her he saw that there was gray in the ash blonde of her hair.

"You've done very well, haven't you, Frank? We've been very pleased to hear of it. It was mentioned in the A.C. magazine that you had been made a director."

"That reminds me," he said. "What are you doing here—on A.C. territory?"

"Ronnie works here—my husband."

"I didn't even know you were married."

Although he had known, of course, from the moment of seeing her prematurely worn face. It had been as obvious that she was married as that she was poor.

"We got married soon after the war. He was a patient in my ward—he was a truck driver and got mined in France. It was such a surprise finding somebody from Holly Ash . . . it was nice to have a pleasant surprise, too. There'd been so many unpleasant ones."

"From Holly Ash? Ronnie, you said?"

She smiled. "Yes, you know him. I'm Mrs. Ashbridge."

"Well, I'm damned! I haven't congratulated you yet, Di. Congratulations. But I didn't see him at the Foremen's Tea this afternoon."

"No, he isn't one. He works in the Scrap. He's off quite a lot. He gets very bad headaches—they last for days sometimes. From being blown up."

He looked at her. "I'll have to see what I can do about that. I'm sure there's something I can do."

Through the laughter that still rolled about them, the little man's voice could be heard, in mournful sweet prediction: "Gonna miss ma momma, ma big fat momma, one of these days!" Diana shook her head.

"No, Frank. It's very good of you, but it's better not. He worries a lot as it is about not being good enough for his job. It would make it worse for him, if you did anything. We manage all right."

"Is he coming along here tonight? I'd like to meet him again. I've known him longer than you have, you know."

"No. He's baby-sitting. We have Mummy with us, of course, but she's bedridden so one of us always stays in. And Ronnie likes to get to bed early. He thinks that he's not so likely to have attacks when he's getting plenty of sleep."

Bates said, "Aunt Julia—bedridden? With what?"

"It's her leg. Osteomyelitis. It's very painful. There isn't much you can do about it." She smiled. "She smokes all the time now."

"I'm sorry. If I'd had time . . . I have to go back tomorrow morning, you understand. Give her my love."

"Of course. I haven't asked you about your family. You have a family, haven't you? I heard somewhere."

"Just one girl. Rather spoiled, I'm afraid."

"We've got three—two boys. They wear me down. We were lucky in getting a council house, but there isn't a lot of room even so. No chance of taking in lodgers!"

From the suddenly increasing volume of applause, it was clear that the little man had finished his turn. They roared for more, and his voice soared, high, pure, insinuating. "I can't give you any thing but love, baby!"

Bates said involuntarily, "How things have changed, Di." She nodded. "Yes, haven't they?"

He went on quickly, "I meant in Holly Ash. To see Woolworth's where Ronnie and I used to sit on the wall and watch the trams go by . . . It's hard to get used to it."

"I suppose it's easier if it happens round you. Things go piece by piece and other things take their place. Sam Heddon died last year."

"Sam Heddon! But he went bankrupt, just before the war."

"He started up again after the war. He had a horse and cart, and he used to sell vegetables. He couldn't have made very much, with all the shops there are now; people aren't interested in buying stuff at the door. We miss him. He always used to have a cup of coffee in with us. And stand at the door, and recite:

Money, oh Money, thy praises I sing . . ."

Bates completed it:

"Thou art my Savior, my Lord, and my King!"

Diana laughed. "He was terribly proud of you, Frank. Your being made a director was reported only a week or two before he stopped coming—he'd had a bad chest for a long time and he got pneumonia. He was coughing badly on his last visit, but he talked about you all the time." She looked at him with a different smile. "The horse was an old acquaintance of yours too."

"I didn't know I knew any horses."

"Milk." She saw that he was still puzzled. "He'd been given

a different name, but I couldn't mistake that big star splashed across his forehead."

He remembered. "One of the Prentice horses. Sally's foal!"

"Yes. Do you remember the first morning we saw him? I've wondered since what happened to him when old Sam died. I suppose they shot him. He was an old horse—over twenty."

For a moment it came back to him, crystal-clear. Not the scene, but a voice: Diana's voice, sharp and happy and eleven years old: "There, Milk. We'll ride all over the place when we're both grown up, you and I, and jump hedges and things."

"Yes," Bates said slowly. "I suppose they will have shot him."

The little man's voice lifted in delicate crescendo:

"Gee, I'd like to see you looking swell, Baby!

Diamond bracelets Woolworths doesn't sell, Baby!"

The crowd howled their appreciation. Out of the corner of his eye, Bates saw why; he had his little thin arms twined round his partner's neck and she was staring ahead, agonizing and pop-eyed.

Bates said, "I wonder—if I went home with you now, would Ronnie still be up?"

The timidity, which had been on her face when he first spoke to her, returned. She said, "No . . . well . . . it's something very silly, Frank. I hope you'll understand. Since he was shocked, Ronnie broods about things—some of them just nonsense. You remember that day John dressed up in some of Daddy's clothes, and frightened the other children away from the boathouse? Ronnie was one of them. He thinks now that you betrayed him . . . that you were his friend and you led him into a trap. He doesn't understand that you were both children—that we were all children. He just thinks he's been betrayed, and it makes no difference that it was so long ago. It's so silly, but his head's very bad. You do understand? It doesn't mean anything."

"No," Bates said, "of course it doesn't. I've been standing here all this time and I haven't offered you a drink. What will you have, Di?"

She smiled, clutching at the friendliness in his voice. "Thank you. I'll have a shandy, Frank."

"Nothing else? Gin and something?"

"No. Just a shandy."

He made his way to the bar. While he was waiting for the shandy, he looked in the direction of the stage. The little man was finishing his second song with a flourish.

"Till that lucky day, you know darn' well, Baby!

I can't give you any thing but love!"

On the last word, he leaped at his partner and clasped her round the neck, his legs twined round her waist, while the applause rose to drown his final note.

SIX

The theory, invented by Helen and accepted without question by Frank, was that her employer objected to her having private telephone conversations at the office; in addition she had no telephone at her home. An arrangement, however, had been made with the switchboard operator at the A.C. headquarters to take messages for Miss Hoskins, and it was by this means that Frank kept in touch with her. Occasionally she telephoned him from a public call box, but in general her role was passive. Frank left the messages, telling her he would be free on such an evening or afternoon, and that she should meet him at a particular place. She fell in with this.

On a fine Saturday morning in November, he met her in Hampstead and they walked together on the heath. She was dressed as she thought a typist should be dressed, in a simple tweed skirt, a woolen jersey under a loose coat, and flat walking shoes; but Frank was amused to note that all—tweed, wool, coat and shoes—were of the best quality. She would not expect a man to note that.

In a spot where they were shielded from possible watchers, he took her in his arms and kissed her. She stood on tiptoe, holding her face up to his; without high heels her smallness was very apparent. Her slender body clung to his own without any strain or uncertainty; at first relaxed and then pressing close in

eagerness. Her lips, when they at last left his, nuzzled against his chest.

He said, "It seems longer than a week."

He felt her head nodding against him. There was a worn slab of stone near by, a pediment remaining, perhaps, from some forgotten portico. He led her toward this and they sat down, side by side, their heads turned inward to watch each other.

"Much longer," she said. "My sweet, I don't want to be jealous, but I really see very little of you. I'm sure you must be carrying on with someone else. With half a dozen perhaps. One evening or one afternoon for each of us. You look like a Bluebeard."

She was only half-joking. He smiled. "I'm a very conscientious officer—you ask my colonel. We have to do something to justify our not being sent overseas to fight."

She shook her head, doubting, wanting to be convinced. "I know so little about you. Perhaps you're married and have a wife and a tremendous family in Wimbledon."

"Why Wimbledon?"

"I imagine it's the place where people have families."

He kept his eyes on her face. "When are you going to marry old Joshua, Helen?"

"Oh, that's silly!" She spoke quickly. "It was only a joke. He's old enough"—her eyes shifted slightly—"old enough to be my father."

"If you know very little about me, I know even less about you. You know I come from Holly Ash in Lancashire. I'm a long way from home. But you've never invited me to go home with you, have you? That one time I offered to see you home, you made an excuse to put me off. Helen, I'm afraid I didn't believe the story you told me—that your mother was terribly strict and you would not dare to be seen with a strange man near your home. You don't give the impression of a girl with strict parents."

In a low voice, she said, "There might be other reasons, just as good. I might not want to tell you about them."

"Now who has the secrets? Helen, will you marry me?"

She looked at him, her lips a little apart, and nodded. "Yes, Frank. Yes, I'll marry you."

He stood up and walked a few paces from her; then he turned round and came back to stand in front of her.

"All those secrets," he said. "Tell me, how were you able to get away to meet me this morning? The office is open on Saturday morning—I found that out."

Her face was solemn, but concealing the impishness of a girl who, having achieved her end, was playing a joke out for the sheer fun of it.

"We take turns to have Saturday off. Today was my turn. If you'd wanted to come out last Saturday morning I shouldn't have been able to meet you." She frowned, improvising her story as she went along. "I didn't get away till after one o'clock last Saturday. Old Joshua can be a devil."

He waited several seconds before he spoke again. Then he said, "I didn't get the usual operator the last time I telephoned the office. I'd remembered Saturday morning would probably be wrong for you, and I was going to leave a message that the afternoon would do as well. Whoever it was on the switchboard didn't know you. I said I wanted to leave a message for Miss Hoskins, and she didn't know who Miss Hoskins was."

Helen said easily, "Probably one of the new girls from the filing section was on for a while. I don't suppose she would know me. There are an awful lot of girls in the office."

He nodded. "I thought of that. I told her the person I was referring to was Mr. Yennet's secretary. She said, 'You mean Mrs. Stephens—shall I put you through to her?'"

Helen put her hand to her face; laughter was already beginning to soften the would-be serious lines of her expression.

"And did you get put through?"

Frank surveyed her sternly. "I asked her to describe Mrs. Stephens. I knew then that you had been deceiving me, but I wanted to find out just how. She told me that Mrs. Stephens was over forty, with gray hair and glasses."

This time Helen giggled. "Didn't she mention the mole on her chin? She trims the hairs on it regularly every New Year."

"This is serious, Helen," he said sharply. "When I first met you, you were with Yennet at that dinner affair. Since he wasn't married, I assumed you were his secretary, and you let me assume it. Now I find you don't work at A.C. at all, and yet

you have enough influence there to get the switchboard operator to take messages for you. There's only one other thing that seems likely."

She was wide-eyed. "And that is . . . ?"

"That you're his mistress."

"And if I—had been . . . you wouldn't marry me?"

"I don't know. It's a shock. I should want to know a lot more—about everything. It's over, with him?"

She shook her head. "It never will be. Oh, Frank, you sweet silly! I don't know how you found out he isn't married, but if you'd taken a little more trouble you'd have learned that he has been married. Mummy died when I was little."

"Mummy! You mean that . . . ?"

"He's my father, of course! That's why I was with him at the dinner. I thought it terribly funny, your taking me for a secretary. When I accepted that first invitation, it was for the fun of it."

"But after that . . . you still kept up the deception."

"After that first evening together, I thought I was going to fall in love with you." She looked at him trustingly. "I couldn't see that I had very much to offer you—except Daddy. So I wouldn't offer that. I wanted it to be this way. I hoped . . . oh, darling, I do love you! You will marry me, won't you? I don't know what I should do if you said no, now."

He said slowly, "In a way this is as big a shock as the other would have been. Helen . . ."

She jumped up, and pressed herself to him. "Precious, I'm awfully ashamed of deceiving you all this time. It'll be the last time ever, I do promise. I swear, I swear, I'll never tell you fibs any more. Say we're going to get married—you did propose to me, and I accepted you, remember."

His smile was a wry one. "I proposed to Helen Hoskins, not to Helen Yennet."

"But what difference is there! Darling, I promise that Daddy won't make any difference. I know he'll like you—I know the kind of people he likes—but even if he didn't, it wouldn't alter things."

"There is a difference. There can't help being a difference. I just don't know."

"If you don't want it, Daddy won't help us. I wouldn't let him. Oh, precious, I only want us to be married and together. Nothing else matters at all."

"It does to me." His look was compassionate. "I'm sorry, Helen. I must think it all over. And on my own. You go back home now. My mind's confused with the whole thing." He smiled ruefully. "I'd bargained for you being a kept woman, but not for this."

She leaned against him. "Oh, Frank, my sweet, I can't lose you now!"

For a moment he answered her embrace, and then disengaged. "I must have time to think."

They walked across the heath in silence. When it came to parting, he kissed her again.

"Phone me," she said. "I'll be waiting—all the time. Don't make me wait too long. Please, darling."

He looked back at the bend of the road; she was still standing, looking after him.

He met Lucus at a little pub where they had often met before. Lucus was already at the bar when Frank came in. He waved to him, and ordered a pint of bitter; his own was half empty. He said warmly, "Glad to see you again, Frank. Pressure of the war easing up on you a bit?"

"A bit." He needed the right opening, something on which to maneuver. Until it offered, he could only be noncommittal. "It varies."

Lucus said, "I know what you mean. But you don't want to take things too much to heart. You sound fed up."

"That varies, too," Frank said. "Sometimes more fed up and sometimes less. How are things on the Great West Road?"

"I've had an offer. They want a new manager down at Sinterden. They've put me up for the job."

Frank looked at him alertly. "That's pretty good, isn't it?"

"Not as big as the one I threw in—Holly Ash. But a few months ago I should have taken it. I'd got over things, and it seemed reasonable enough to start doing something properly again. I can work with other people, but I work better on my

own. I was hoping the Sinterden job would turn up—the man down there was overdue for retirement in 'thirty-nine."

"And now that it has turned up—what's wrong with it?"

Lucus shrugged. "Things change. I'll tell you, Frank. There's something I've been considering—especially the last couple of months when you've not been able to get away from your place at all. You know I've been living in digs since I came to London?"

Frank let his gaze rest on the glass of beer in front of him. "Yes."

"I haven't bothered before about where I lived, or in what conditions, but lately I've been thinking that I might take a flat here in town. I believe it's fairly easy to get hold of something. And then I thought . . . if it were somewhere handy from your point of view, you could use it as well, just as you fancied. It would give you a sort of base, away from the Army. What do you think of the idea?"

He saw that this was the opening. He said, "I'd better be frank with you, Bill."

Lucus's round mild face stared at him. "Of course."

"That day I stopped you in the Strand—when you agreed to come and have a drink with me—we were both remembering Paddy, weren't we?" Lucus nodded. "Apart from Paddy, there would have been no reason for our seeing each other at all. We never got on particularly well in the old days."

"From my own point of view," Lucus said, "I know why. I was in love with Paddy. No, I'm not a queer. I pay my regular visits to a young lady in Chiswick; it was Wavertree when I was at Holly Ash. I suppose I'd always been looking for a son, and I found one in Paddy. I didn't give myself a chance of liking you because I was jealous of you—you'd known Paddy so much longer than I had and, being his own age, you were so much closer to him. I don't know whether you felt anything of the same about me. I was trespassing too, wasn't I?"

"I wasn't in love with Paddy. I want you to get this straight, Bill. I thought of Paddy when I stopped you in the street, but there was nothing in it except idle curiosity. If you're still looking for a son, Bill, you will have to look somewhere else."

He saw the eyes wince in the placid face. "One son's enough,

when you lose him that way. Too many. This idea of mine—it's just something for the convenience of both of us. You can drop in—use it when you like. We each have our own lives to lead."

"No. Thank you for the offer, but no. I'm afraid it's not been strictly true that I've been too busy to see you at all. The trouble is we're of different generations, different types, with different interests." He looked into Lucus's eyes, framing the words with cold deliberation. "We bore each other. You might think you could live on the ashes of whatever you imagined you felt for Paddy. I never felt anything for him, except the companionship children have for each other. And I've got past the stage of letting myself be bored by things for want of the determination to end them."

It was Lucus who looked away. "I see."

"I wonder if you do. If I were you, I should take the Sinterden job, Bill."

Lucus still kept his eyes averted. "Perhaps I will."

Their glasses were both empty. Frank looked at them.

"I won't reorder. I want to get along now to the club. The last drink's on you."

As though summoning up his will for the act, Lucus looked at him directly. "I would wish you good luck, Frank," he said. "Except that I'm just beginning to understand how unnecessary that would be."

Frank nodded. "I don't believe in luck. Or sentiment. Good night, Bill."

He lay on the bed and watched Patricia moving about the room. Her dressing, like most things about her, gave the appearance of casualness, but misleadingly so: the items, when pulled on or snapped into place, formed a neat and tidy whole. She stood in front of the mirrored wardrobe and brushed her hair back with hasty strokes, holding three or four clips between her teeth. These she slipped into place finally. She looked at Frank for approval, and he nodded.

"Quite satisfactory."

That was a difference between her and Helen; it was impossible to think of Helen appealing to a man for confirmation that

her appearance could not be improved. At the same time, Helen was the more dependent of the two—dependent in the more important matters.

Patricia said, "I'll go and see about a meal."

In his mind there was regret, but he was unsure to what it was directed. All this must end very soon, and he did not want any other result. The thought of continuing to associate with Patricia had never occurred to him. The thing had run its course, and the only problem was the best means of ending it. But the regret was there, all the same.

He said to her, "No. Come over here."

She looked at him doubtfully. "I'm dressed and tidy, and besides . . ."

"No. Just to talk."

She came and sat up beside him, resting against the headboard. She was wearing the dark green dress into which she generally changed on coming to the flat; it brought out the coppery red tints in her hair. They stayed in silence for a time. It was Patricia who broke it. Before she spoke, he felt the irritation of knowing what subject it would be that would interrupt his own pleasant melancholy.

"If we only knew something—after this time, some kind of news should have come through. He may be dead—may have been dead for all these weeks."

"There's nothing you can do. You'll have to wait. He may be a prisoner."

After a pause, she said, "You're fed up with my worrying about John, aren't you?"

Her acuteness surprised him. "Of course not. He's your brother. But it won't do you any good to worry, Pat."

"In a way he's your brother, too."

"If so, we're condemned by State as well as Church."

"You know what I mean. Frank, I'm frightened sometimes. There's something so cold in you—a frozen heart, like the boy in *The Snow Queen*. No, it's not just that you don't like my talking about John. It's something about the way you react to it all. As though you're so self-sufficient that no pains from outside can touch you. I suppose it may be something to do with your having been an only child."

He smiled. "An only child?"

"I mean—with larger families I suppose one must get more used to—to sharing things. Not just toys, but pain and crying. I remember Mummy used to say that, with us, one crying quite often set the whole four off. Of course, we were very close together, in age as well."

"You're wrong, though. I wasn't an only child."

He looked up and saw her face gazing down at his, unsure and bewildered. It was strange, he thought, that this was something he had never mentioned before to Patricia and would never, he knew, speak of to Helen. He was prepared to toss her the secret, secure in the knowledge that it was too late for her to use it.

"I was the middle child of three. There was a boy two years older than I. He died of meningitis when he was almost seven. My mother was carrying at the time. She had a daughter three months later. Stillborn."

"How dreadful for her. No one ever mentioned it. But for you—it was the same as being an only child, really."

He smiled. "Not quite the same. You see, the wrong son died."

"What on earth . . . ? That's silly."

"His name was Arthur. My mother and father both worshiped him. He was fair-haired, like your family. I don't remember him from my own recollection, but I remember the photographs in the album that was kept in a drawer in their bedroom. They took the photographs off the wall; it would have been too much for them if they hadn't. I suppose he had a winning personality."

She said incredulously, "You're still jealous of him! Good heavens—do you think you haven't got a winning personality yourself? You know you have."

He half-closed his eyes. "With me, it's been hard work. It's been a matter of watching people, trying them out, learning their prejudices, their weak spots, the amount of cheek and the amount of flattery one could get away with. It's been an ordinary little boy, an unprepossessing little boy, forcing people to like him and depend on him."

She put her hand down and stroked his hair. "As I do?"

Darling—all this built up on a little boy's frightened reaction to a big brother's death . . . why didn't you tell me about it before?"

"You don't believe it, do you—that the wrong son died?"

"I believe that you might have believed it. It must have been an awful thing. I suppose your mother and father were very fond of him—a first-born. You interpreted it the wrong way. Probably even then you were a self-centered little boy. You thought they had no right to grieve for your brother when you needed their attention."

He closed his eyes completely, and saw that different room swim into shape, that far-off summer evening.

"I don't think I was self-centered then," he said. "From what I've gathered I used to follow Arthur round, like a dog at his heels. As for interpreting things the wrong way . . . I told you I can't remember Arthur—perhaps I don't want to remember him. But I remember his coffin."

He paused. She did not say anything; her hand continued to stroke his hair.

"The coffin was in the back bedroom, where the two of us had slept. They put my cot into their room when he got so ill. He was coffined during the afternoon, and after I had gone to bed, in the evening, they came upstairs together. They looked in at me first, and I pretended to be asleep—I suppose because I had cried enough already, and knew I would cry again if anyone spoke to me.

"And yet when they had turned away and I heard the noise of them going along the landing to the other bedroom, I was frightened. I slipped out of my cot and went after them—quietly because the whole house had gone quiet with death. I looked in through the other bedroom door. They had their backs to me. They were standing not quite together, and I could see one of the brass handles of the coffin through the little gap between them.

"I stood there, shivering although it was summer, and waited for something that would break the silence and let me run to them for comfort. It seemed ages, but I suppose it wasn't more than a minute or two. Then my father spoke. He said: 'Why did it have to be him that went? Why not the other?'"

He heard Patricia say, "Oh, no!" but that other world, that world of the fixed and trembling moment, was still the more real one. Tired sunlight on lace curtains, the little room, the two figures turned away from him, and the warm gleam of brass.

"For a few moments longer I stayed there. I was waiting to see if my mother said anything, I think. She didn't. The two of them stared without speaking at the coffin, and then I went away, back to my cot. I'd been taught to pray—copying Arthur, of course. You know—'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild . . .' I lay in bed, praying: 'Gentle Jesus, make me dead and not him.' Over and over again. I must have gone to sleep like that."

Patricia said, "That poor little boy . . . and that was you. No wonder . . ."

He opened his eyes and looked up at her; her voice had been deep-toned—there was a tear on her cheek. He said, "I never remember praying after that." He laughed. "My mother had always wanted a daughter. When the girl was born dead in the autumn, I was taken to see her in her coffin. I don't remember that scene as I remember the other, but I know that while I stood and gazed solemnly at the little corpse I was struggling to hold my joy in. It was so fierce. 'I'm glad! I'm glad!' I think I said it out loud when I got away on my own. Being the other one for the second time, I was more able to be pleased about my luck. Arthur and the nameless girl were dead; being loved didn't help them any more. I was alive."

"And you had to grow up with that—hating your mother and father, hating the dead brother and sister . . ."

"Hating?" He looked at her in surprise. "I didn't hate them. I don't hate people. I believe I liked them reasonably well. They didn't ask for much from me. They always treated me all right, and in due course they became quite proud of me. The last time I was on leave they made me have a studio photograph taken. My mother put a real Sandhurst polish on my Sam Browne before we went down to Liverpool. And the photograph is hanging over the mantelpiece in the parlor."

"Don't!" Patricia shook her head. "It's all so dreadful. Frank—why did you never tell me anything about this before?"

Should he answer, he wondered, with the truth? Because there were three: Patrick and John and Patricia—Diana did not

count. Three whose beauty and arrogance fascinated a small unattractive boy under gray Lancashire skies; three whom his tendrils had clung to while he fought his way up to the light. And now Patrick was dead, and John was dead, and the moment of saying good-by to Patricia would not be long delayed. Telling Patricia, he was telling them all; showing his weakness, boasting his strength. It would never be necessary with Helen.

He said, "I suppose it never seemed important."

She turned round on the bed so that she sat leaning over him, looking directly down on him.

"That isn't true. You know it's important. Anyway, I'm glad you told me now. I shall know better how to cope with you."

"Do I particularly need coping with?"

She smiled. "Probably your fellow officers have to do most of the coping at present."

He shook his head. "No complaints on that score. Go and ask my colonel. I do a certain amount of his coping for him, as a matter of fact."

"Then who does cope with you?"

"I do it myself."

"No! You mustn't. No one ever should. And I shan't let you. Now I know all this, I shall insist on being allowed to cope with you."

No, he thought, not yet. Not today. Cowardice? He was sure it was not. It was a different kind of reluctance, the reluctance that came from knowing, deeply and inwardly, that the moment was not yet ripe, and would ripen. There would be a time, and soon, but it was not today.

Instead he reached up, putting his arms round her, and drew her down. She responded willingly, her lips, half parted, finding his. He kissed her, wondering what was different. Then he knew. He had kindled pity in her and, in so short a space, pity was alive in all her actions, even in this, in passion. And it would never die; it would live and spread until it was killed.

He drew his body away from hers, and stood up. Not today he would kill it, but soon. She lay back on the bed, and pity was in the gray-green eyes and round the fine mouth. It was over between them. While pity lived, nothing could ever stir his lust

toward that magnificent body, and when pity had been killed it would be too late. Other things would have died with it.

He said, "I think you can go and get that meal ready now."

Her face clouded. "What is it? What's the matter?"

He smiled. "Hunger. There are various kinds of simple needs." He bent down and caught her hands, a stranger's, pulling her upright. "Go and do your duty while I get dressed."

Helen had given him her home telephone number before they parted on the heath. He waited several days before he telephoned her there.

He said, "Can I have Miss Yennet, please?"

"Who is that calling?"

The voice was slow and solemn and in the accent of butler's English.

"Would you tell her—Captain Bates."

"Please hold the line, sir."

Helen said, "Frank, it's really you? Oh, precious, I'd given you up. I never thought you would call me."

"I'd like to see you. When do you think you could make it?"

"Absolutely any time. Straightaway, if you like."

"The Army wouldn't like it. I'm not off duty till five-thirty. It will have to be sometime after that."

"Can I come and pick you up? I've been hoarding petrol for simply ages against a rainy day."

"Do you think today is rainy enough?"

"Wonderfully rainy. I'll be outside your office right on the dot. Don't be late, will you?"

"We have a brood of Free French officers in the basement. You can amuse yourself if I am. But I won't be."

"Darling, I don't want to amuse myself. I'm just frightfully, frightfully faithful."

"You're alliterative as well. I must attend to the Army's business now. 'By, Helen."

"By, my sweet. I love you."

She sat at the wheel of an M.G. sports car, her head bare and a silk scarf thrown round her neck. She had discarded her disguise completely; she was wearing a loose astrakhan coat, and he noticed a ring with a large diamond on the right hand that

rested casually on the wheel. He stopped just by the car, and looked at her intently.

"Darling!" She laughed, a little nervously, shrilly. "Don't say you're going to turn me down after all. You look most fearfully solemn."

He got into the car beside her. "I hope you will always wear expensive clothes and trappings. They look right on you."

She looked at him. "You won't mind?"

He bent over and kissed her; she clung to him for a second or two and then drew back. He heard her sigh.

She said, "You must think of your reputation, my sweet. Here, right in front of your office. What will the Free French think if they see us?"

"You could do my reputation nothing but good. Especially with the Free French. I love you, Helen. Are you going to marry me?"

"It's a real proposal this time? You won't back out again? Of course I'm going to marry you. I never really gave up hope."

They kissed again, at greater length. She took her lips away at last and said chidingly, in his ear, "An old man with red tabs on his uniform has just given us a most peculiar look. We should be more respectable."

"You shouldn't have your eyes open when I'm kissing you," he told her.

"Shouldn't I? I always keep my eyes open. You'll have to teach me. You'll have to teach me all kinds of things."

"I suppose so. And I can think of better places. Where are we going to celebrate our engagement? Your choice."

She looked at him with some nervousness. "I did say to Daddy that I was hoping to bring a future husband back to dinner. He's the kind of person one says things like that to. Was it very awful of me? We'll go somewhere else, if you'd rather."

He smiled. "I shall have to meet him sometime, shan't I? It's one of the less pleasant things about being an adventurer that you have to face the outraged parent."

She put a hand across to seal his mouth; the thin band of the diamond ring was hard against his lips.

"You mustn't talk like that. You know it isn't true, and it's unkind to me. Adventurers only prey on silly women."

He had put his own hand up to cover hers, and now he held it in front of him, examining it. He touched the ring lightly. "That's a lovely stone."

"Isn't it? From Daddy—for my twenty-first birthday."

"It will make my ring seem a very poor kind of thing." He took the box from his pocket, and snapped it open, revealing the narrow gold circlet set with three small diamonds. "You know what the pay of a junior officer is like, and I have no capital to draw on."

She took the ring from the box and fitted it on her finger. "It fits beautifully. How did you manage it? Rings are always too loose on me—Daddy's had to be shortened."

"I told them you had thin fingers, and I told them to err on the side of tightness. Once it's on, I don't want it to come off again."

She kissed him again, quickly. "Thank you, my sweet. I don't want it to come off, either. It's a blissful ring—quite blissful." She took the ring from her other hand and dropped it in the empty box; then she put the box away in her handbag. "From now on I shan't wear any rings except the ones you buy me."

"Let's go," he said. "I have my ordeal to get over."

She pressed the starter. She said confidently, "It won't be an ordeal. I promise you that."

She drove well; it was part of a competence shown in all the fields in which she was prepared to compete. She stopped the car at the end of the drive, and touched him gently with her hand. "Home." She pushed her door open and got out and he followed suit at the other side.

"What about the car? Are you leaving it here?"

"Someone will put it away." She came round and tucked her arm inside his. "Come on, darling. Soon be over."

The house was fairly newly built, in red brick with a Queen Anne facing. The long and rather straggling line of the front would have been more suited to an Elizabethan effect, but the over-all impression was a pleasant one. They went into a hall that gave a feeling of lightness even in this heavy winter dusk. Helen snapped a light on, and threw her coat onto a polished chest. A butler, appearing from one of the doors, took charge of it.

He said, "Good evening, Miss Helen. I failed to hear you drive up."

"Good evening, Hoskins." Frank glanced at her, and she smiled. "Where's Daddy?"

"In his study. Shall I have the car put away?"

"Yes, please. Come along, Frank. I'll get you a drink and then go and drag him out."

She led him into a drawing room, decorated predominantly in blue, with splashes of red. From the sideboard she brought a whisky decanter and a glass. She put them down on a table, and stood on tiptoe to brush her lips against his face.

"Help yourself, precious. I shall only be a few seconds. Promise me you won't run away."

He poured whisky into the glass and smiled at her. "I never run away."

She had her arm round her father's shoulder when she came back into the room; Joshua Yennet was a small man, not very much taller than Helen herself. He was smiling amiably enough but Frank recognized, and appreciated, the shrewdness of his eyes.

Helen said, "Here he is. Daddy—Frank."

The two men shook hands. Yennet had a dry firm grip.

Frank said, "Hello, sir."

"I'm glad to know you, Frank," Yennet said. "You can bring me a glass too, Helen." His eyes watched her as she went to the sideboard. "You know, Frank, you have my sympathy. When she sets her mind on something, she gets it. You're snaffled with that ring."

Helen set a glass down and filled it. "Darling, I should have warned you about Daddy's heavy humor."

Frank said to Yennet, "I hope you'll overlook my putting the ring on before seeing you."

"Overlook it? I shouldn't be surprised if she'd frog-marched you to a jeweler's and sent you in at the point of a pistol. Well, I propose to drink the health of the newly engaged couple. Long life and happiness to you both, and a quiverful of grandchildren to me."

Helen said, "Thank you, Daddy. Would you like us to go and breed right away?"

"Not immediately. I imagine I shall have to have a few formal words with Frank, however unnecessary it may seem. I think my study will be as handy a place as any. Can you do without him for quarter of an hour?"

"I suppose so. But don't chase him away."

"I've toyed with the idea of throwing open the French windows and saying, 'Run for your liberty.' But I doubt if it would serve any useful purpose. Come on, Frank."

Yennet's study looked like an office; the austerity of safe, filing cabinets and cupboards was broken only by the pictures on the wall. These were somewhat unusual; a collection of typically Victorian literary paintings, featuring children or family groups notably attended by dogs. They were well arranged as to size and shape of canvas; the effect was of windows onto scenes that were individually different but all part of the same world.

Yennet observed his eye on them. "They're originals, of course. They've shown a small profit. They cost practically nothing to buy and I've sold the reproduction rights in three or four of them to rural calendar people. That was just luck; their plates were done in the blitz and apparently the West Riding can't survive without them."

Frank said, "I like pictures to tell a story, myself. I'm told it's a sign of having no taste."

Yennet nodded. "I've heard the same. In my case, there is something else as well. Have a look at this one."

Frank stood beside him, regarding the picture he indicated. It showed the interior of a farmhouse, oak-beamed and the floor red-tiled, the walls whitewashed, a gleaming copper kettle on the hob. The farmer, red-faced, whiskered and gaitered, sat dozing in his armchair, and his wife knitted in another chair that faced his. A youth of about eighteen lay sprawled on a sofa against one wall, reading a book. Coming in from another room was a buxom fresh-faced girl; she carried a jug. The only other creature in the room was a collie dog, but beyond the leaded casement the figure of a soldier was visible. He had his pack on his shoulder and he was leaning forward, looking into the room and laughing. The farmer and his wife and the youth had not seen him, but the girl had, and so had the dog. Her face showed the joy she felt; the dog was vigorously wagging its tail.

"The title," Yennet pointed out, "is plain, short, and descriptive. 'The Soldier's Return.' We infer the rest. The devoted old couple who have prayed, night after night, that their warrior son should be spared the dangers that surrounded him. The younger brother, impatient for the return of that older brother so idolized and copied. And the two on whom rejoicing has already fallen—the demure innocent sister and the faithful dog. In a moment the others will know too. What a happiness will be there! Every normal heart must lift a little when it contemplates the moment just breaking in that happy domestic circle."

The tone had been enthusiastic; the psychology was not an entirely improbable one. Nevertheless, Frank surveyed Yennet warily.

"If it was like that," he commented.

Yennet stared at him briefly, and then the stare cracked into a smile.

"If it was, if it was! My dear Frank. But let us examine it on premises that may be different but are no less valid—if anything more so. The farmer has grown up from being an obstinate and ignorant young man into an even more obstinate and equally ignorant old one. He drove his elder son into the redcoats because he could not bear any independence of spirit about him. He hoped he'd got rid of him for good. And the sweet, white-haired mother—coping for over thirty years with an utterly wretched housekeeping allowance has turned her into a single-minded miser. How will she react to her son's return? The food comes mostly from the farm, but even before he went for a soldier he drank heavily, and pestered her for money, since he could never hope to get any from his father. The younger son never demands money from her. Those gentle old lips will tighten into anger when the pressure is applied once again.

"The younger son gets on fairly well with his father because he has the sense to intrigue behind his back rather than challenge him to his face. It is the same with the mother; he does not ask, he steals, and the servants get the blame. Insofar as he is capable of prayer, he has been praying for his brother's death, since this would leave him sole heir to the farm. His prayer not having been answered, he will probably find an early opportunity to run a pitchfork through him.

"That leaves us with the soldier, the girl, and the dog. The soldier is a waster, a drunkard, and a lecher without even the discrimination some animals use. The girl? That faint flush on those delicate cheeks as she sees her brother's face again; could that be the recollection and the anticipation of—incest?"

He paused. Frank said, "There's still the dog."

"Yes. The dog. I exempt the dog from any secondary interpretation. All the paintings here have dogs. I could not bear to have them on my wall without the dogs. I am fond of children too."

"And the moral? This kind of thing always has a moral, doesn't it?"

"The moral is to live in the moment before revelation; to fight for that moment and to act mercilessly against anyone who surrenders to reality. The Victorians had every vice that our contemporary world can boast of. But the Victorians did not boast of them, and they did not, in general, write novels about them or paint distorted pictures that reflected them. They kept them under cover, and anyone who was rash enough to lift the cover was made to repent his rashness."

Yennet turned away from the paintings and went to sit down at his desk.

"Have a chair, Frank," he said. "Now, I suppose I really must say a few serious words to you as my prospective son-in-law."

Frank sat down. "I thought you'd said them, sir."

Yennet smiled. "I like you, Frank. As far as my mental constitution lets me, of course. We'll get this over quickly. I'm sure you will appreciate that, in my position and with Helen my only child, one thing is bound to occur to me. Not: are you an honest man?—because I don't expect to meet one. But: are you primarily an adventurer?"

Yennet paused again; his pauses clearly demanded reply.

"When I met Helen," Frank said, "she introduced herself to me as Helen Hoskins, your secretary."

Yennet nodded. "She told me that. Apparently . . . you only discovered her real identity a few days ago. It must have been a great shock to you. No, don't interrupt. I like you, Frank, and I am assuming that in fact you did not know who she was. Now. I am giving this union my blessing, but I feel it worth

while instructing you as to the way in which I had prepared against the possibility of someone marrying Helen for her—and my—money.

“In the first place I have arranged to settle a substantial sum on Helen when she marries. In the second, her husband, providing he is at all suitable and has no other pressing commitments, can be taken into the organization of which I am head, with the ultimate aim that he should take my place. The voting stock which I control will be willed to Helen and to any children of the marriage, with administration in the hands of the husband. I think all that is fair enough to him.”

Frank said slowly, “A good deal more than fair.”

“I’m glad you think so. The ties which I have taken the trouble to add are not the kind that will bother you, since you are marrying Helen for love; for that matter, they would not bother an adventurer who had sense as well as greed. Of course, while I am alive I will retain essential control of both the organization and the stock. After my death . . . my lawyers have tied things up so that no one could have a hope of diverting any of the money. Should there be a divorce or even a separation, control reverts to Helen or to a trustee on behalf of the children. You have the picture?”

“I believe so.”

“Are you willing to fit into it?”

“Of course. Why shouldn’t I be?”

Yennet got up from his chair. He came over and put his hand on Frank’s shoulder.

“I’m very pleased with you as a future son-in-law, Frank. From my point of view, Helen has chosen very well—and from her own point of view too, I think. You will make a businessman, and I believe you will make a steady husband. I don’t ask for too much in that direction. For instance, I have not been a particularly sensual man myself, but you may be less fortunate. If you are, then I expect you to use every caution. I’m sure you will.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“No? You know yourself best. And you know something of me, by now. I want respectability—for myself and my family. With or without hypocrisy. I haven’t asked you about your

background. I gather from something Helen said that your father is a working man. That doesn't particularly interest me except in that, if it is so, you should have a sound respect for the advantages of money and position. I hope you have, because I have it myself."

Frank nodded. "I have."

"Good. There's one last thing. I trust you will be willing to live here after you are married, and put up with me. I am not much trouble, and it's a big house with an adequate staff of servants. I'm anxious to avoid a lonely old age if I possibly can."

"Of course."

"I like you more and more, Frank. You have co-operated with me splendidly in making this interview a success, by not saying any more than was absolutely necessary, and saying that in the right way and at the right time. I have had to say certain things which a less controlled person could have seen as innuendo, and taken violent objection to.

"Such a reaction, of course, would not in itself have shown the innuendo to be either justified or unjustified. Neither does your own self-control, but your self-control shows you are likely to be the man who will fulfill the moderate conditions I've laid down.

"And now—whether the remarks were innuendoes or not, and whether they were justified or not, I think we shall both succeed in forgetting them. We can return to our respective roles—you as a lover and I as the heavy-humored father—with the happy knowledge of having set our relationship on an admirably firm basis. I think we could have another drink on it, don't you?"

He produced glasses and a bottle from the left-hand side of his desk, and set them up.

Frank said, "Your good health, sir."

"And yours, Frank. And the prosperity of our future partnership." He wandered over, glass in hand, to stand in front of "The Soldier's Return" once more. "You know, Frank, sometimes I wonder if I'm not too misanthropic. Very likely the dog's a sheep killer, as well."

Frank went directly from his office to the flat, getting there

before six o'clock. Patricia had said she was coming straight over also; she should arrive between six and a quarter past. He switched on the wireless for the news and then, after the first few minutes, switched it off again. He mostly preferred silence when he was by himself.

Tonight, whether or not the circumstances were favorable, must see the final break with Patricia. That thought was uppermost in his mind, but deliberately he refrained from elaborating it. It had never been a habit of his to rehearse scenes in advance; the scenes matured from an act of will and he had no doubts of his competence to handle them. It was better when a fulcrum moment could be found, to tilt the relationship easily and perceptibly into a new orientation, but even without that the scenes could be matured.

The restlessness he felt was apparent to him only as a physical restlessness. He walked from one to another room of the flat—picked up books and put them down—switched the radio on again, to the Forces Program, and switched it off. Then for a time he stood by the window in the living room, forcing himself to be still while he watched the scurry of people in the deep hustling dark of Knightsbridge. He looked at his watch. Twenty past six. She was late. Now, for the last time, he was bound to her actions, dependent on her presence. Irritation was relieved by the certainty that it was the last, the never-to-be-repeated time. He turned abruptly away from the window and began walking up and down Verrey's Turkish carpet.

He glanced at his watch again as he heard the door to the flat click open. It was nearly twenty to seven. He went through into the hall and watched Patricia coming up the stairs. She looked ill; her face was colorless. It was bad luck. Then brutality, he thought, come to my aid.

She looked up and saw him. He smiled, but there was no answering smile. It crossed his mind—could she have found out about Helen? If so, everything was easy again.

“You’re late, Pat,” he said. “Held up?”

She reached the top of the stairs. “Could I have a drink of water?” She was sitting in one of the chairs in the hall when he returned from the kitchen. She drank the whole glass of water, and gave the empty glass back to him. “Thank you.”

"What is it?" he asked. "Are you ill?"

"I've had a letter." Her voice was low and very deep. She fumbled awkwardly in her handbag. "It was waiting when I came off duty. You'll have to read it, Frank."

He recognized John's handwriting as soon as she brought it out of her bag. He took it from her, and read it.

DEAR PAT:

By the time this gets to you I imagine you will have had time to prepare for bad news. Our friends can get a couple of letters out and they think they can get them to England, but not, unfortunately, anything as big as a human being. The other letter is for the War Office, telling them, as far as I can, what went wrong. This is for you. I gather the Germans are going to finish us off quite quickly. They feel they have to do it, but they are being relatively decent about it.

I thought a lot before I decided to write this. I've never been keen on the idea of letters from the condemned cell. They tend to get treasured for the wrong reasons and to induce morbidity. I would never have written to Mummy. I am writing to you only because something has happened which concerns you very much.

From the setup, I took it that you and Frank would probably get married eventually. Naturally, I thought it a good idea. But it's about that I have to write to you. I wish it could just be best wishes. What I have to say leaves a bad taste in my mouth—not a good thing to die with.

We passed through London just before this do. We were under secret orders, and so I couldn't get in touch with you. But while we were waiting for briefing at an Army place, I had a visitor. He was a funny and rather unpleasant little fellow. He told me his name was Smethers, and that he worked with Frank.

He told me something else as well. I don't know how to believe it, or how to disbelieve it. He said that the original orders detailing the men for this job passed through Frank's hands, and that in them I had been put down as a stand-by, not as part of the actual detail. He

said that his O.C. told Frank that this was practically a suicide stunt, and that after that Frank altered the orders so that I came on the detail. It seems that he makes a habit of watching everything that goes on. Frank apparently went out of the room for a few minutes and Smethers took the opportunity of glancing at the orders. The change had been made in Frank's handwriting. He thought there could be no other reason for it but private malice. I gather the name rang a bell; I suppose he's taken messages for Frank from you. Although he didn't say as much, I think he had scented adulterous intrigue—that you, having the same name, were my wife and Frank was the guilty and conspiring lover.

God knows what he expected me to do. In fact, I thanked him as politely as I could and told him I would look into things when I got back. He said, "But you won't get back," and, of course, he's right.

The whole thing's incredible. I thought at first that Smethers was mad. Now I don't know. He was right about it being a suicide stunt, and he must have been in on the thing to some extent to know where to find me. That's bothered me, too. If it did pass through Frank's hands, then Frank knew I was in London for briefing and could have dropped in to see me without any offense against security. He didn't.

I just don't know, Pat. If it weren't for you I should let it ride, but I can't, can I? I've got to tell you all this. I leave it to you. It's a bad legacy, I'm afraid, but it's the only one I've got.

And sitting here, with nothing to do except wait, I can't help thinking about Paddy. What happened then? I don't say I'd die happy if I could clear things in my mind—but happier, at any rate.

My love, Pat. It's up to the women to keep the Mansons going now.

Yours,
JOHN

Frank folded up the letter and gave it back to Patricia. Her

eyes were on him, fixed, agonizing. She accepted the letter without taking them away. After a moment, she said, "It's true, then."

While he had been reading the letter, his mind had been considering, acutely, needle-sharp, how best to deal with it. There was, he realized, no explanation which would stand up to the briefest examination. All that mattered was to find a course of action that would avert a situation that threatened to overwhelm him. There were three factors that could make his downfall certain; two people and a letter. Smethers. Smethers had gone to John, but he had not said anything in any other quarter. Because, fundamentally, he was a coward. Smethers could be intimidated.

"But how could you?" Patricia cried. "And why? Why? It's senseless. No sane person could do it."

Patricia was the key. He wondered dispassionately what the chances were. Her love for John—her love for him. In that conflict lay his hope.

She got to her feet. He saw that her teeth were clenched. She pummeled his chest, her breathing quick and sobbing.

"Say something! You must say something! Don't stand there. Say you didn't do it—you couldn't have done it!"

He disengaged himself from her, and walked away to lean against the balustrade.

Patricia stared at him. Her legs seemed to fail, and she stumbled back to the chair.

"A cigarette?" he asked.

She shook her head. She said, after a silence, "And Paddy? After he died, you didn't want to talk about him to any of us. We thought it was because you and he had been so close. Was it . . . ? No! Frank. I think I'm going mad. Oh, God! Don't leave me in this agony. Tell me—tell me anything. I don't mind what it is—what lies. Just talk to me—anything, anything!"

"There doesn't seem very much to say."

"But why? How could you do it? They were your . . ."

"Don't forget my tale of woe the other day. 'That poor little boy . . . and that was me.' Remember—you insisted on being allowed to cope with me. Go ahead and cope."

She said wonderingly, "You're sneering at me. I think I could

. . . cope—even with this, if there was something in you I could touch. But there isn't anything."

"I could put up a show for you, Pat, if I thought it worth while."

"Worth while!" She looked at him. "No, go on talking. It doesn't matter what you say."

"I have nothing to say."

"If I've ever meant anything to you, don't leave me in silence now. I can't live in silence. Even if you . . . if you gloat over them, it will be something. I must hear you talking. I must."

He looked at her. She would not betray him; that was quite sure. There was the one other—Smethers. He remembered suddenly the pile of work on Smethers's desks, the remark, casual but stressed: "I'll be here till eight at least." It wasn't seven yet.

"Talk to me," she said. "Anything!"

"I'm going out for a while, Pat," he said. "I'll be about an hour, I suppose."

"Don't go out."

It was said simply but starkly. He went toward the head of the stairs, and she got up from her chair to cross his path. She stood in front of him. He put his hands on her arms. She saw that he intended to kiss her and tried to pull herself away from him.

"No! How could you . . . ? Let me go—you must let me go!"

He forced her toward the balustrade. She struggled, but she had no real strength. Forcing her back across the top of the handrail, he kissed her. She continued to struggle for a little while, and then he felt her relax. When that happened, he pulled her forward and released her. She stood, holding the handrail, swaying slightly.

"An hour, or perhaps a little longer," he told her.

She did not say anything while he descended the stairs, but as he reached the door at their foot, she called to him with such an urgency that he paused, despite himself, and looked back. She looked down at him, her face white, her hair loose.

"Don't go. Don't leave me. I'm terribly frightened. Please don't leave me. Please."

"I won't be very long."

He turned away from her and opened the door and went out.

Smethers looked up as he went into the office. His lank dark hair had fallen forward over his narrow forehead; he put his hand up to brush it back and clumsily knocked off his spectacles. While he fumbled for them and put them on again, Frank crossed the room and adopted a comfortable leaning posture against the edge of his desk.

"I didn't expect you back," Smethers said. "Forget something?"

"No." He took a cigarette out, and lit it. He felt no particular need of a cigarette, but Smethers was a nonsmoker. The act expressed an advantage. "I thought I should like to have a word with you, Peter."

"Yes, of course. Just as you like."

"Have you ever thought of asking for a posting to a field unit?"

"No. No, never. Why should I?"

"I think I can say that the Colonel would not oppose a request like that, if you were to make one."

Smethers burst out, "What's the idea, Frank? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I've seen a letter from a dead man. A Captain Manson. He says you and he had a little chat before he went on his mission. You never mentioned it to me."

He watched Smethers gather himself to face the shock and did not intervene to prevent this; he preferred that Smethers should achieve a temporary recovery and balance so that his final confusion should be the more complete. Smethers said at last, "All right! I see what it is now. Don't think you can bluff me, Bates. I'm quite prepared to give evidence against you, you murdering swine. Whatever it costs me."

"I can tell you what it would cost you. Your commission. But that's on the supposition that this nonsense developed into an official inquiry. It won't."

"You're bluffing. I can see you're bluffing. There's bound to be an inquiry."

Frank looked at him calmly. "I gather you told Captain Manson that on the original orders there was a correction, in my handwriting, putting him from stand-by on to the actual detail."

"You know there was."

"The story would be more credible if you could supply me with a motive for doing a thing like that."

"You know the motive! I saw it as soon as I saw the name. Because you've been living with his wife."

"Your trouble is that you jump to conclusions. Apart from that you make a very good snoop. It wouldn't have been very hard for you to check that detail. You would have found that Junior Officer Manson is not married. She is Captain Manson's sister."

"I'm not going to be bluffed. Even if that's true, there must be a motive. There has to be one."

Frank nodded. "To make your story reasonable, there would have to be one. I suppose you've abstracted the original order with the supposed correction on?"

"You destroyed it, didn't you? I saw it was missing when the file came through again. That tells against you—that the order's missing."

"No. It tells against the person whose story is the least convincing one. Shall I tell you how I think it would look to the Colonel? In the first place, you apparently thought it proper to go through my files. That won't look very good."

"I know that. I don't mind."

"Don't you? I had told you that afternoon that I knew one of the unfortunates on the detail. You saw the name, knew I was on close terms with an A.T.S. officer of the same name, and jumped to the wrong conclusion. You went to Manson and told him a wild story of my having altered the orders, and incidentally told him that he was on a suicide mission—a breach of military discipline on a very large scale."

"Why should I do it? What reason could I have?"

Frank shrugged. "God knows. A brainstorm—ingrowing jealousy. More reason, at any rate, than I could have for doing what you accused me of doing. I had known Manson since we were boys, and I can show that we were on the best of terms. His sister, who's just had the letter from him, can testify to that."

"But to get back to your course of action—when the file came through again, you took out the original orders and destroyed them—a precaution against Captain Manson surviving and taking the matter up."

"You're crazy," Smethers said. "No one is going to believe you. You can't fool me like that."

"Everyone is going to believe me. Patricia Manson does already. As for the Colonel—shall I tell you the first question he would put to you, if you repeated such a story to him?" Smethers was silent. "Why didn't you report this to the proper authorities? Why didn't you, Peter?"

Smethers said, "I don't know. I should have done."

"The obvious thing, of course, is that there was nothing to report—that you had recovered from your brainstorm and knew your only hope was to sit tight." He smiled at Smethers. "But if we suppose for a minute that your version is true—what explanation is there? Shall I tell you? The explanation is that you lacked the nerve. And if you didn't have the nerve to bring things into the open then, can you imagine what it's going to be like facing a court of inquiry now?"

He watched Smethers, finding the minute signs—the clenching fingers, the nervous movement of the lips—which told him that he had won.

"You see, Peter, when it's a case of charges and counter-charges, and there's no evidence either way, it becomes a matter of the personality of the people concerned. The Colonel's view of both of us becomes rather important at that stage. And, of course, you are admitting some rather heavy breaches of etiquette and regulations to start with, aren't you? What do you think of your chances?"

There was silence for a moment. Smethers said, "You said—at the beginning—there needn't be an inquiry."

Frank shook his head. "I didn't say there needn't be an inquiry. I said there wouldn't be one."

"All right, then." Smethers shifted awkwardly. "We'll let it drop."

"No. I'll tell you what we will do. You will write a note asking the Colonel for a posting to a field unit, and I will watch you write it."

Smethers expressed his last defiance. "I won't. I'm not the murderer."

Frank straightened up. "O.K. I'll see you in the morning.

You can start practicing your version for the Colonel tonight. I should concentrate on method of delivery if I were you."

Smethers called him back before he reached the door. He turned, waiting.

"All right. It'll be a relief to get away."

Frank watched him write the note, checked it, and took it in to place it on the Colonel's desk. When he came out, he said to Smethers, "We'll leave now. I'll take your key—just in case you have another brainstorm and decide to come back again tonight."

He held out his hand and Smethers put the key in it.

"Tell me one thing," Smethers said. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" Frank asked.

Smethers said no more, but left the office in silence.

He thought he smelled gas on the first flight of stairs, although of course that was ridiculous. But the smell was quite plain when he got into the flat. As he came up the staircase he saw that the bedroom door was closed. He went to it and pushed it open; there was a rug wedged against the bottom but the key had not been turned in the lock. He held his breath while he went across and lifted the window open.

Patricia was lying in front of the gas fire, her head on a cushion and her red-blonde hair loose on the carpet. She was very peaceful, and she was dead. He felt her pulse and then, to check, held her hand mirror against her lips. There was no breath of life.

She had not locked the door; had she hoped, even while lying here, that he might come back and find her before it was too late? There was no way of knowing.

He found John's letter in the top of her handbag, which was lying at the bottom of the bed. He took it into the bathroom, tore it into pieces, and flushed it down the lavatory. He had to flush it three times, waiting for the cistern to refill each time, before he had cleared it all.

Then he went into the hall and picked up the telephone.

7

Breakfast was late; after it was over Mrs. Cartwright excused herself and retired to make preparations for going to church. While she was still in earshot, Cartwright said, "Good old Milly! She'll put in two or three prayers for us two miserable sinners. Eh, Frank?"

When she came downstairs again, the two men were reading Sunday newspapers. She said to Bates, "I should have asked you if you wanted to come to church. Though I don't suppose you do?"

Bates shook his head. "Thank you, no."

Cartwright, glancing up from the *News of the World*, said jovially: "Wouldn't do if we were all holy, Milly. You'd have no one to pray for."

The dull blustery weather that had set in the previous day still persisted; there was no sun and a sharp wind lashed the well-groomed shrubs in this and neighboring gardens.

"Anything you feel like doing?" Cartwright asked. "There's an hour and a half before we need get the car out. I generally spend Sunday mornings lazing about and reading, but if you have any other ideas . . ."

"I think I'll go out for another walk."

Cartwright nodded. "Still taking the longing lingering look behind you? You'll want to go on your own again in that case."

"Yes," Bates said. "I would prefer that."

He headed away from the main road, in the direction of the Manor House. He did not reach it. This road, he found, curved back on itself. After twenty minutes' walking he discovered that he had come to the Liverpool road after all, at a point perhaps half a mile north of the site of Ash Cottages.

There was a detached house called "Juan-les-Pins" on the corner. That was where the lodge for the Manor House had

stood, surrounded by dark glossy rhododendrons. Although it had been an obvious place for a tram stop, the stop had actually been fifty yards up the road—an incongruity, it was rumored, that had represented the Strellings' sole victory in their bitter and protracted campaign against the Liverpool tramways. And now the trams had gone and a bus stop was here, exactly opposite "Juan-les-Pins."

On the opposite side of the road, where the long rows of glass roofs of the Pinker Nurseries had caught the sun, a housing estate was in process of being built. He had lost a penny there once, when a penny had been important enough for its loss to cloud more than a single day. One of these houses, perhaps, would hide in its foundations that anxious grief.

There was nowhere to go. The new Holly Ash permitted no digressions from the course of the arterial highway that pumped through it the lifeblood of Liverpool. Bates walked, as he had to, along the pavement. The Knowsley Lane, when he reached it, was simply another point of entry into another housing estate—in this case already completed and inhabited.

Soon after, the shops began, and in the distance his eye caught the familiar red and gold of the Woolworth façade. He was not far from home.

This was the home which he had not chosen, the home into which he had been placed by fate. In a few hours he would be back in his real home. He thought with pleasure of his father-in-law and his daughter, of Helen, and of the house itself. Those he had won and kept. The keeping was not the lesser victory.

In the satisfaction of this contemplation, he remembered Diana. It might be possible to arrange for her to have some help—privately, without Ronnie's knowledge. Because the habit of being honest with himself had been one of his earliest achievements, and one of the most useful to him, he recognized that any gift he made would be contemptuous: a few coins tossed to the loser. He had always known that Diana was unimportant, and there had been confirmation enough last night in her poverty and tired wretchedness.

The other three he had destroyed.

Yet he had not lifted a hand to any of them. Patrick had been given the same chance that he had had. Patricia had only been

left to stare truth in the face. John—a few words scribbled on a sheet of paper.

Nothing had been premeditated. In all three cases, the act had crystallized out of the immediate moment, out of hate that rose like a flame and supplanted—love?

He would not accept the word. If there had been love, there would have been later regret, and he had never regretted anything. But if not love, what? Years of accepting John's leadership, years of constant association with Patrick, a closeness in passion with Patricia that there had never been—that he had never expected there would be—with Helen. All leading to those three moments of decision, to those three deaths.

His mind went back again to that first encounter; to himself, a boy, looking down from the boathouse window onto those four, those sunflower heads. Then and later he had found unreasonable beauty in them—a harvest of beauty which looked to be cut down. Unreasonable beauty joined with the calm and confident exercise of unreasonable power.

I hated them, he thought dispassionately. I always hated them. There was never any love to be supplanted; no more than envy and fascination. The only one I did not hate was Diana, because she was the weakest of the four. And the one I hated most was John, because in him, more than any, beauty and power went hand in hand.

There were no regrets. A four-branched flowering tree; three of the branches had been cut down, and the fourth lay bruised and broken on this unfriendly ground. Now he rested his ax. The Mansons were finished, and he could enjoy the kingdom he had gained, in peace.

Here was Woolworth's. He looked at the old stone mounting block and a memory that was strange both in its unfamiliarity and its freshness came back to him. He and Arthur had played here, one summer afternoon. Five years old, he had looked up to see Arthur standing triumphant on the very top, laughing at him as he laboriously clambered up onto the base.

“Come on, our Frank! Don't you be so slow.”

That was what Arthur was like, he thought. I remember. Of course.

“Come on. I'll give you a hand up.”

Until they both stood together, his arm clutching his big brother for support, on the smooth sun-warm stone. Behind them was the creviced slabbed wall with its rounded top, and the thick rustling leaves of the elderberry tree that leaned over from the gardener's cottage.

It was in that summer. It could not have been more than a few weeks before Arthur died.

He looked at the mounting stone again, but the scene was lost. Let it stay lost. He turned his back on it. Across the road was the turning that led to Cartwright's house; to the short journey by car and the longer one by train, to Helen waiting, and the world of his choosing and winning.

It was by chance that he glanced down the hill before he crossed the road. A boy, three or four years old, was coming up the hill toward him. He was skipping, solemnly happy, and singing some tune. One hand clutched a threadbare and dirty Teddy bear by its leg.

Bates stared, in incredulity first and then in pain—a pain that clutched and twisted somewhere in his chest.

There could be no mistaking who the boy was. His hair was the identical gold that John's had been, and his face was the Manson face. Beauty was there already, and the lines of joy that would bring power: power not fought for, cheated for, killed for; but accepted casually as a right.

As the boy came past him, he whispered, unable to keep the word back, "John!"

The boy looked at him quickly, as a child does when its name is called; but, seeing only a stranger, gave him an open friendly smile and went on.

Bates stood there until the boy was twenty or thirty yards from him, the small legs still skipping, the Teddy bear swinging. For a moment the sun appeared, and aureoled the bright head to still brighter gold.

The pain was too great. He sat down on the base of the mounting stone, and rested his head in his cupped hands.

Then, for the first time that he could remember, he began to weep.

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